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Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

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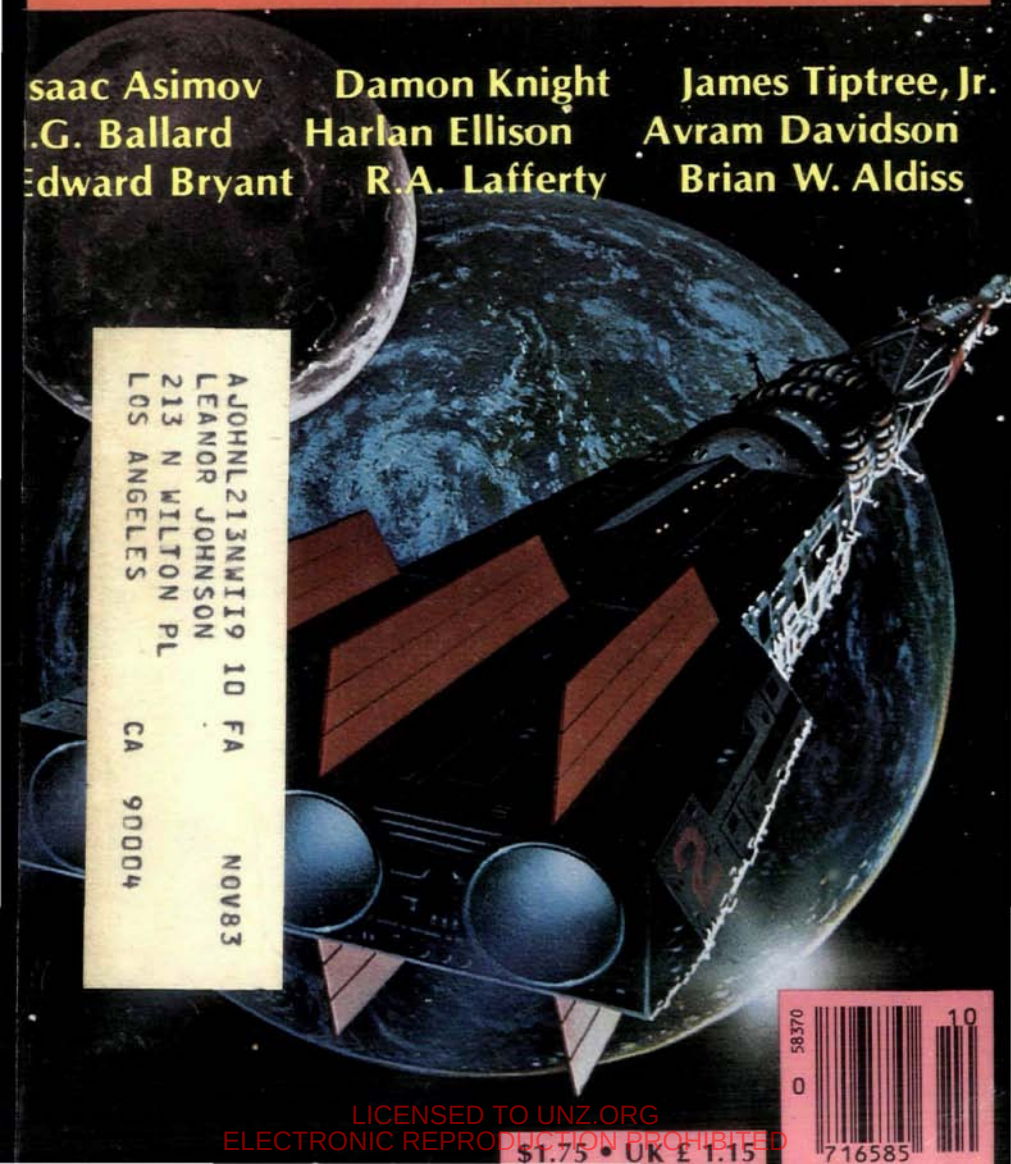

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OCTOBER • 34th Anniversary Issue

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This, the first new Tiptree story here in five years, is one of two "Tales of the Quintana Roo" we have on hand from the Hugo and Nebula award-winning author of "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" and many others. The Quintana Roo is the eastern section of Mexico's Yucatan, and it is one fascinating ghost-rustly place...

The Boy Who Waterskied To Forever

BY **JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.**

Her depths are not all hated,
Joyous her minions move;
And human still may trade a soul
For her unhuman love.
And the one she has accepted
May finish out his race
Through portals unsuspected
To another time and place.

This happened the year the coast road finally came through.

For eight years, a trail cut by *machete* and strewn with piano-sized rocks had run behind the coco ranch and ended at the *boca*, the inlet from lagoon to sea. Now the Yucatecan government had bridged the *boca* and pushed a one-lane cut all the way south to the fishing colony at Pajaros lighthouse. It was an evil deed.

Every evening now the big refrigerator trucks ground past, going south; in the small hours before dawn they came groaning back, loaded to the axles with illegal seafood — rare and delicious fish and stone crabs, netted on the last spawning grounds of the bay for the greedy stomachs of the tourists a hundred miles north at the new resort of Cancún. Small comfort that this traffic would not last long, for its end would mean that those species had been fished to extinction. Nightfall for another wild beauty.

But there was a tiny, selfish compensation: the new road did make it possible for an elderly bicycling *gringo* to reach a hitherto-inaccessible small bay. It was a magical, untouched diving paradise that I spotted from the air. Ferocious reefs barred it from the sea, and once-impenetrable mangrove swamps guarded it from the land. Twice this year I had cycled to the vicinity, laboriously hidden my wheel to avoid leaving tracks, and fought my way to shore, guided by the sound of the sea. But each time I had come

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too late to take more than a taste of Eden before I had to start my exhausting trek back to the *rancho*.

This day I started early enough. The sun stood just past noon when I stood on the rocky verge of the enchanting little cove. The water was four meters of crystal, revealing a rich undersea world. Three pink spoonbills stared incuriously from the far side as I shucked off shirt and pants, and a bananaquit investigated my shoes. There was no trace of other visitors or alien paths, and the snorkel gear I had hidden there last trip was all intact. I checked the papers and *dinero* already in their waterproof pouch on my belt and slipped off the rocks into the warm Caribbean with great delight: here was a place where snorkeling was the perfect way to go, where I could forget that age had put scuba dives forever beyond my strength.

Those first hours fled like moments; the reality was even finer than the promise. I visited first my few familiar spots: the ledge where two enormous black angelfish had set up housekeeping — and there they were, sweeping flat to the pale sand as my shadow came over, rolling their big eyes in what seemed like an imploring plea, but was doubtless considered menacing by their natural enemies. Then there were the tiny clouds of color rising from where the brilliant parrotfish munched and chewed a rock. And the white sand floor, which suddenly erupted into a four-foot stingray, sailing off to halt in frozen invisibility a few yards away. Obviously no one had ever used a spear gun here.

Then I began to explore, letting the gentle swells carry me over perfect lace-coral fields, dazzled by neon-blue angels, admiring the impossible pink of the ill-named and delectable hogfish — another proof, if one were needed, that no one had yet shot over this reef. Clouds of blue-headed wrasse were feeding in my shadow: I paused for a long inspection, hoping to catch sight of one of the juvenile females, who mate in schools, in the phase of growing into a much larger, red-and-yellow, monogamous male. Until recently these two forms had been considered separate species, and I never see them without wondering what our own social system would be like had humans evolved with this trait.

Imagine our world, if all the senior males, the O.J. Simpsons, the Walter Cronkites and Leonid Brezhnevs, had started out as little girls and young mothers? Just in time, I remembered not to chuckle and choke myself.

Never had the underwater world been more ravishing; I flippered lazily through turquoise and liquid air, noting that the light was now tinged with faint gold. Even the evil head of a moray eel protruding from its hole in the reef was a green-gold heraldic emblem of villainy, and the enormous grouper stupidly eyeing me from a half-spear shot away was crusted with dark jewels.

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The sea was so calm that I decided to cross the inner reef and have a look at the coral heads where the so-called sleeping sharks occasionally hide. I had acquired companions; three young barracudas were circling me, disappearing for moments only to rejoin me from a new angle, their mouths as usual open in toothy gapes. I had taken the normal precaution of removing all shiny gear, even to my medical-plaque chain, but one large fellow was showing so much interest in my diving watch that I debated hiding it in my suit. The local barracudas are said to be harmless — I had been instructed, when meeting one nose-to-nose under water, to shout "Boo!" But I had found this difficult, especially in a snorkel mask. My sound came out as a pallid "Urk!"

I found a pass in the inner reef and flippered through, momentarily losing my carnivorous friends. The in-shore bay was an uninteresting grass-plain relieved here and there by a giant orange starfish, a flotilla of yellowtails, or a huge live conch. It was the isolated brain-coral heads which interested me. I cruised along up-current; the old learn quickly to start their journeys upwind or uphill, so that nature

A NOTE ABOUT THE MAYAS OF THE QUINTANA ROO

The Quitana Roo — pronounced Keen-TAH-nah Row — is a real and very strange place: The 'wild' Easternmost shore of the Yucatan Peninsula, officially, but not psychologically a part of Mexico. A diary of life on its shores could often be taken for a log of life on an alien planet.

For example, few people know that the millions-strong Maya peoples quite recently rose and fought bloodily for their independence, principally against Mexico. They were not totally defeated; the Maya wars ended with a negotiated truce only in 1935. (The Secretary of the Maya Armies died the year of my first visit.) Mexico promptly divided the peninsula into the provinces of Campeche, Yucatan, and the Territory of Quintana Roo, which includes Cozumel. On that coast there are today (1980) Maya villages who still exercise their treaty rights of remaining unassimilated and 'modernized'. They are visited only rarely, and by invitation. The governor of Cozumel, a friend of mine, last year paid such a visit; he went alone and for the last 16 miles, along an archaic *sac bé*, on foot.

It is difficult for those afflicted by Mayaphilia to shut off, but perhaps the Good Editor will allow two more points: First, Mayas, the most oriental of all native American Indians, are as different from the oft-conquered, tribally-mixed, tourist-acclimated Indians you meet in Mainland Mexico as an unreconstructed Highland Scot is from a cockney of London. And second, 99 percent of the substance of the yarns that follow is simple fact ... and I could not swear that what seems fictional was not recounted to me by the four-thousand-year old voices that murmur still in the nights of the Quintana Roo.

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will help them home. What I was looking for was a large pile with a cave at its base in which a sleeper shark might lie.

Most were too small, so I swam out further, toward the second reef. From here I could just glimpse the shining white dot above the hazy southern coastline which was the white tower of Tuloom, high on its cliff. Tuloom is our chief local *ruina*, a mediocre remnant of greatness whose claims to fame are its glorious site and one strange carving, unique in all Yucatán, which may — or may not — concern this tale.

By the center of the second reef I spotted exactly what I was looking for: It was perfect — great rounded boulders, with a big dim cave or tunnel at the base like those where I had encountered the sleepers in younger days, before my trick ear took the deeper dives away. This one was only about five meters down. Peering, I was almost sure that the sun was lighting something rounded and amber-tan floating in the cave. Moreover, my attendant barracudas seemed to have found business elsewhere. Could I dive down and look?

Debating, I took off my mask to clean it and noticed that the sun was now definitely slanting down. There was not much time for the long return. Dilemma: I longed mightily to look at that shark, and I longed mightily not to. It was not merely the pain I would suffer in my ear — to tell the truth, it was a lonesome place and time, if this happened to be shark wake-up hour. But — that gnawing question of my life — was I needlessly afraid? Was I, er, chicken?

As I dithered, two things occurred almost at once. The first was auditory — I heard the beat of a boat's motor around the point. This drove the shark from my mind — there is no shame in taking refuge from the occasional maniac who tears full speed along the inner reef to make time, trusting to the god of machismo that he won't hit a coral head. Many of them also enjoy making swimmers dive for their lives. I paddled as fast as I could go for the white water of the middle reef, feeling like a wheelchair driver caught on the Indianapolis raceway.

Here I met with the second, larger event: At the base of the big reef was something long and moving. The water was roiled, and at first I thought I was seeing some unearthly endless centipede, walking south. Then a clear interval showed me what it was — *langustas*, the tropic lobsters — an enormous unending file of them, all sizes and ages, following each other along the base of the reef. I was looking upon a recently discovered mystery — the Migration of the Lobsters, coming from God knew where, en route to an equally unknown destination, upon which few people have ever set eyes.

I stared, counting to the hundreds, before I came out of my trance to realize that no rooster-tailed sportscraft had appeared. In fact, now I could

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hear clearer, it was not a speedboat at all, but the throbbing of a much larger craft moving along the outermost reef. Correct: around the point was coming the ramshackle box-form of a *langustera* — a lobster boat — her white paint looking deceptively smart in the afternoon sun, and her old motor setting up an out of synch cacophony. She was towing a pair of dinghies.

The uproar ceased as she came opposite me by the far reef; there was a rattle of anchor-chain, and the dinghies were double-manned and cutting along side the reef with unusual speed. As the nearest anchored, a figure in bright red shorts stood up and tossed his long hair before masking up. Unmistakable.

"Lorenzo! Lorenzo Canseco! Qué tal?"

Typically, he gave me an offhand wave; he had long since spotted and identified me. Lorenzo was one of our local diving superstars, which meant that the *langustera* was the *Angélique*. I knew her captain well.

But there was less than the usual gaiety to Lorenzo's wave, and he was in the water fast and businesslike. The other diver, whom I hadn't seen clearly, was already in and working. The far boat was empty too. All four divers were searching the outer reef and the space between, normally a source.

I looked down at my procession of strange little beings. So long as no one crossed the middle reef in the right spot they were safe.

I swam over to Lorenzo's dinghy, a plan forming in my mind. The other diver was just coming up to boat two undersized *langustas* and a respectable grouper. To my surprise, it was my friend the owner-captain himself, an emaciated gold-tanned figure, with white hair and a remarkably distinguished white hairline mustache.

"Don Manuel! Se recuerde de su viejo amigo?"

My Spanish has been called *unicamente desastroso;* it was possibly that, rather than my appearance, which enabled him to greet me with warmth. Then he rested his elbows on the gunwales, and I saw that he was quite tired. This probably meant that he had engaged in exertions that would have hospitalized most gringos.

"How goes it?"

Captain Manuel shook his white head, baring his teeth in a combined grimace of despair, fatalism, and hate. He seemed content to chat a moment while he rested. So I asked him more.

He had, it seemed, been all the way to Punta Rosa, starting before light.

"Good catch, I hope?" (But I had already noticed that the *Angélique* was riding much too high in the water.)

Manuel made an untranslatable remark, the essence of which was that one Carlos Negrón *and* his new boat could have sexual congress with the devil. It seemed that Carlos had outrun him down the entire route, preempting all the choicest spots, and at one point even side-swiping Manuel's dinghy.

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"The irony of it is, Carlos doesn't even know where to fish. He is new. But he hired that *loco* Arturo whom I fired for drunkenness, may the devil screw them both. After all I put up with from Arturo, teaching him...."

"A bad trip. I am grieved."

He stared somberly at the *Angélique*, his thin face a stoic mask.

"Worse than that. I have not made even the diesel bill. And I had to place so much hope on this trip."

"There is need?"

He tossed his white hair back proudly; I could see him considering scornfully what a gringo could know of need. But our long friendship prevailed.

"There is need," he said simply. Nodding his head. "*Muchos difficultates a la casa. Mi nina* — my little girl, and my wife, both they are sick. They require *specialistos*, you understand. *Muy pronto*. With the government nothing can be done."

During this interchange the vision of my helpless lobsters, streaming by two hundred meters inshore, had been rising unwelcomely behind my eyes. Marching in their thousands, on the mysterious journey that had gone on since long before the trivial race of man. A journey that was, perhaps, essential to their survival. Elsewhere they were already heavily overfished; perhaps even now they too faced their end.

But the trivial race of man was my race, and Manuel was my friend. The threat to him and his was real too. Still — had I not been there by chance, would not Manuel's own expertise have had to suffice? Nor would I have known of Carlos Negrón, nor the illness of Manuel's family.

While I floated there in the beauty, miserable, the other dinghy came up. A boy named Ruffino captained it. "Nada," he said, gesturing expressively. "And the petrol begins to lack. We go?"

Captain Manuel let his eyes droop closed for a moment, an expression of despair I had not before seen on his strong face. And at that moment a thought occurred to me:

"My" lobsters were not safe — not safe at all. They were headed straight toward the nets and spears of the predatory Carlos when they rounded Punta Rosa — not to mention the depredations that would be made by casual pot-hunters for a hundred miles.

"Wait, Manuel," I said. "Tell them to wait. I want you to follow me over there." I pointed to the inner reef, thinking there was just enough time to take at least a few to do him some good. The feeling of Judas choked my throat; I had to clear my snorkel twice before we were looking down at the great horde of marchers, lit by the inshore sun.

Time ... but I had not counted on Maya speed and endurance, nor the sharp Maya eyesight — nor the underwater *focos* Manuel and Ruffino carried to light the scene.

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The *Angélique* was moved twice before it was over, deep in the water and groaning in every ancient timber when Manuel called it a day.

"How can I ever thank you, my friend?" Manuel inquired as the dinghies were hoisted and the *Angélique* prepared to depart. "You will wish Lorenzo to carry you back to the *rancho* in the skiff?"

"No. Many thanks, but I would prefer to go with you to Cozumel tonight. I have a small *négocio* to do in the morning. If you could perhaps lend me a shirt and help me get to the Maya Cozumel? I keep an old *maleta* of clothes with Senora Blaustein."

Manuel nodded approvingly. The Maya Cozumel is not one of your tourist palaces, but a sober and inexpensive Mexican commercial traveler's inn, run by one of the formidable Hispanic-Teutons who conduct much of Mexico's invisible commercial life.

"It would by my pleasure," said Manuel. "But the *rancho* will be searching for you, no?"

"Ah, but *Don* Pa'o has now a short-wave radio, on which they must listen for the Gardia Aereo for an hour at nine every night. If you could change crystals and tell him to pick me up at the Playa del Carmen ferry tomorrow morning? You could say you fished me from the sea, to avoid trouble with the *Gardia*."

"Oh, no problem. Everybody uses that band to sell a motor and buy two ducks. This is an excellent idea, my friend. But you will not stay at the Maya. You will come home with me to celebrate."

"We will plan that later, *Don* Manuel old friend; you know I have not your strength for celebration and you will need to see to your wife."

And so it came about that *Don* Manuel and I reclined upon the bridge on the *Angélique*, while she creaked and grumbled her way across the moonlit straits towards Cozumel. The other divers, after a cold meat of snapper seasoned with what tasted like live coals, had promptly made for their hammocks. *Don* Manuel was doubtless twice as tired, but pride compelled him to take the captain's watch. The sea was quiet now, but nothing in the Quintana Roo is to be granted perfect trust.

To help him stay awake, we chatted idly in our usual mixture of tongues: of doings of mutual friends, of the iniquity of government, of all that had changed since the days when he was a young sportsboat captain and I an eager lover of the sea. His English was only somewhat better than my Spanish, but we had always understood one another well, and the tale that follows reflects that understanding as much as the literal words.

We were commenting on the skills of the various divers, notably that of Lorenzo, his head boy.

"Ah, yes. Lorenzo Canseco. He is

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good, very good. But the boy you should have seen was K'o." Manuel nodded, and repeated with special relish and the full Maya click:

"Audomaro K'o. *Mayo puro*, you understand; he was proud of it even then. K'o, K'ou — it means something like Lord, or young god, maybe. We were boys together, you see, in those days when the scuba was just getting started here." Manuel chuckled, shaking his head. "No one had ever heard of safety; we tied our gear on with sisal ropes. But K'o — he was the first to buy a proper watch. There will never be his like again."

"He is ... gone?"

Captain Manuel hesitated and let himself make one of his few Maya mannerisms, a high-pitched sound deep in his throat. He belonged to the old school, before it became fashionable to be more Maya than Spanish. "Yes, he is gone," he said finally. "I saw him go. But...."

"A diving accident?"

"Oh, no. You must understand that K'o never had accidents. He was strong, he was handsome, he could do anything — but he had also the *cabeza*." Manuel tapped his forehead. "Others did foolish things — not he. I tell you: incredible — Once, below a hundred meters, his companion's airhose broke, and K'o brought him up safely, holding his own mask on the boy, back on himself, then back on the boy — all the time using his watch, so that they would not get the bends. It took nearly an hour like that to bring them both safely up. And the sea bad and night falling. I ask you — who could do that? And then the next week, Marco, the damn fool he saved, went down to two hundred and caught the rapture of the deeps. He untied himself before we knew. The last we saw of Marco, he was diving down, down into the Cuba current that runs off the north reef. We could see his light for a short time, going ever deeper and faster. Then it vanished. Even his body was never found."

"God."

"Yes. Oh, there are endless stories about K'o. He was *good*. When the *Capitan* Cousteau came through here, he chose K'o to dive with him. *De vero*. But the most funny story was about the cinema people, when K'o played the shark with the girl."

"What?"

"Yes. Everyone was crazy then, you understand, and the cinema people were loco locissimo. In this story a beautiful young actress is pursued by a shark who catches her and —" Captain Manuel glanced at me expressively "— the shark ah, makes love to her. Can you imagine? Well, they fixed K'o up in this shark body and he pursued the girl — she was a *puta*, but a beauty, the director's girl. K'o caught her all right — and then, by god, he actually did the business. Right there in the water. In that crazy shark outfit. He just barely kept the girl from drowning, too, she was screeching like a per-

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riqua. And the director jumping up and down in the boat — nothing he could do except howl and scream and fire K'o, who did not give a damn. I always wanted to see that film. But I think something went wrong with the camera, everyone was laughing like lunatics."

We were both chuckling too, while the old boat thudded on, following the rising moon. A school of porpoises was playing in the bow wave, their phosporescent trails vying with the moonlight. Behind us the moonlit spark that was Tuloom was sinking out of sight. It was the last hour of true night, before the sky beyond Cozumel, island of sunrise, would fade to grey.

On the strength of the movie starlet's fate I decided to try a highly diluted sample of the good captain's fiery tequilla, while he had his normal libation.

"Ah, yes, stories of youth," the old man said when we were settled again. "We were young, life was to spend. So many gone. I remember one that scared us all, though. We were exploring the great reef that slants down to the north — the one Marco jumped off into the deep — and something went wrong with this other boy's tank. His companion — not K'o — panicked and cut him loose, and poor Pedro shot to the surface like a bullet. K'o was in the boat. We pulled him in; he seemed all right but he was dead, you understand. He knew he only had a few minutes. He sent messages to his mother and sister, and then, just as the nitrogen was starting to work on him, he gave K'o his watch. It was a cheap little thing, I remember it well, because K'o always wore it, on his left wrist. Then of course the sickness took him, every cell in Pedro's body began to rupture and collapse, and the boy screaming, screaming; like a screaming bag of jelly toward the end ... I tell you, we were all a bit more sober after that."

"Dreadful indeed ... but K'o, what of him?"

"Ah ..." The old man took a long pull at his tequila. "Well, by this time there were coming the tourists, you know, and all sorts of new equipment, and good boats. And the aqua skis. Well! If only you could have seen K'o perform on waterskis — dance, jump, stand on his head, ride one like a surfboard, carry girls — anything. And I remember he had the first of those *brillante* striped shorts, what they call Madras. The *touristas* — all the women — were falling over him. But it was no use. K'o was for the sea. Only the sea. Anything to do with the sea, he was interested — but beyond that," Manuel made the Maya sound again — "there were many unhappy girls, I tell you. What K'o wanted he took, and then he was off again like a god.

"It was the time when the waterskiing was the great thing. *Estiloso.* K'o liked me because I always had a boat. Sometimes I could beg or borrow even a really big one. Also, I would spend the hours he wanted to perfect

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each thing. And then he told me what he really planned.

"He wanted to be the first man to waterski from Cozumel to the mainland. These days, perhaps, it may not sound like much, but even now it would take great strength. And with the equipment we had then—!"

"There's always a hell of a chop — very rough water in that strait."

"Yes ... but we were young and crazy. And, moreover, he didn't plan to go straight across the shortest way. He wanted to go slightly south, up-current, to land at Tuloom. It was not stupid; the angle of the big swells would be better so.

"Of course there were no people at Tuloom then. That was before the Mexican *arqueologicos* and the *turistas.* Even the vandals, the *ladrones,* could find nothing more to take. Soon it would have been all gone. And yet, when Chichen and Uxmaal were already long dead, Tuloom was still a major place, with sea commerce and many towers and people. But not religious, I think ... Something always a little *mysterioso* about Tuloom. Barren women still sometimes make pilgrimages there to watch the sunrise. They use the old name, Zamá, the Dawn."

"Poor old Tuloom," I sighed. "Have you read what the *conquistador* Grijalva said of it, when he sailed by in 1518? He did not land, you know, they found the great bay of Ascensión instead."

"No. What of Tuloom?"

" 'We saw there a shining bourg, so large that Seville itself could not have appeared larger or finer.' And he speaks of 'a very high tower, and crowds of Indians bearing standards'."

"That ... I had not heard." Captain Manuel's gaze was on me, yet not quite focused. "White ... finer than Seville." He repeated so softly that I thought he might be yielding to sleep.

"So you tried this trip, this crossing?"

He blinked, nodded. "Ah, sí!

"It was still dark when we started, just such a morning as this is going to be, with a small moon in the sunrise. I had got hold of the best boat I knew — about seven meters with two hundred-horsepower outboards — very modern for her day. And how we worked on the ropes and harnesses — I tell you, we could have dragged wild horses. Spare skis, of course, in case one cracked or he hit flotsam. Even some candy bars and water we tied around his waist. So we crept out of the marina, in the moonlight, and he waved me on impatiently and got up on the skis, and I opened the throttle and the boat began to plane. Oh god, we were young. And the strange thing is, although K'o was so determined to be the first, he told no one but me his plans. It was all between him and the sea, I think.

"Well, for a long time it was just work, with the world turning pale around us, and me trying to pick the

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best path for him. He was all business, after one flourish when we took off. He just settled down determined to do it. The porpoises found us in the first light. I could see them playing around him. But that was all right; they seemed to understand the business, they never got in the way. The light was quite deceptive when we crossed the first big rough current, and I was worried that he was having a bad trip, but every time I looked back he waved me on.

"And then of course the color began to come — a beautiful dawn — look, there's a little rosea ahead of us now — and our spirits rose. Of course we were headed away from the sun. But you know the west is beautiful in the sunrise too."

My Spanish was not up to attempting "Not through Eastern windows when morning comes, comes in the light," so I merely agreed.

"We crossed the second bad current then in good style and came to quite a stretch of smooth water. I decided it was time for him to eat and drink. So I steadied down the pace, gesturing to him. He didn't want to — he got mad and made a fist, waving me on — but I was stubborn too, and he saw I wouldn't pick up until he'd taken something. So he did, while I took the steadiest course I could. I was watching him too, to make sure he ate — I can still recall seeing the light flash off both those watches, his own good one and the poor thing the dead boy gave him on his other wrist.

"Then he threw the empty canteen away and waved me on, and I stood the boat up and we made wonderful time across that smooth sea. The sky was fantastic above us — like cities of all colors, how do you say, castles — *cuidades del cielo*, cities of the sky; and all colored flowers with the great *rayas* of light streaming onto them from behind us, out of the east. And then just as we came through the last rough current, I saw that the lowest line of color was the cocos of the mainland shore! And there above on the cliff was the shining tower of Tuloom, and I knew if I was careful we were really going to make it.

"But we were not there yet, not by much. Many bones of ships and men lie between where we were and the Castle of Tuloom.

"That rough water goes all the way to the main reef in front of Tuloom, you see, sweeping along by the harbor passes; it can be malicious. And the passes are not simple; there appear to be several, although only two are truly good. But the light was brighter every moment, and the seeing was clear — I tell you, I ran those last kilometers with so great care, trying to put K'o just right of every wave — I was like a *borracho*, a drunkard, who is carrying the last bottle of tequila on earth. Whenever I looked back, he was waving to go faster. And in fact he was right, some speed is necessary for such water. But always I was worried

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because we would have to slow down for the pass, and the danger of the following waves broaching me — I was in such a state I was not even sure I could find the right pass, though I knew it like my wife's ear. And, oh! — the beautiful colors of the dawn, and the dolphins playing — never shall I feel such an hour again. But we were going fast, so fast.

"I had to lose speed without letting any slack come in K'o's lines, you see. But of course he understood that as well as I did. I could see him commencing to cross the wake, back and forth, always with the lines so beautifully tight, but gentle. But always waving to me to go faster, waving like mad. I thought he was for the first time a little loco. And then, my god — just as I found the start of the main pass, I saw him cut far to one side and I understood what he was planning.

"He was not going to follow me through, see? He was going to shoot along beside me through the *other* pass. That was why he wanted the speed. So I opened the throttle, not caring if I smashed the whole boat, and the lines went tight, tight, with the speed he needed. And yet, my god, how tired his arms must have been.

"So he turned and came snapping back past me in a great curve, like the end of a whip — standing up like a prince — I tell you. He even waved as he shot by into his pass, on the crest of a wave, just right — did I tell you he had learned to use the skis like a surfboard, long before the surfers ever came? I could see him as clearly as I can see you, and his lines were still tight, just right — and his dolphins tearing along with him too.

"It was that strange moment of sunrise, the instant when the sun rises falsely — Oh, yes, I know how we see it by refraction before it is truly there, while it is still really under the curve of the sea. And sometimes it is the wrong shape, misshapen — although it is the true sun, still it is for a few seconds *sinistre.* A *momento spectrale* — which I do not quite like. This was the sun that burst upon him just as he passed in. I remember there was a small cloud cutting it in three fat chunks, like a papaya, cold but beautiful. And at that moment K'o's harness went weird — it was still tight, you understand, and I could see him holding it — but the part near me faded in an abnormal fashion, it became hazy like a *vapor.*

"And then so many things happened to me at once, although I never took my eyes off K'o. He was planing, or riding at tremendous speed through the pass into Tuloom harbor. He had to be heading for a terrible spill in the coral. For a time he seemed still to hold the rope; for all I know the dolphins were pulling him. The wave cresting all around him — but he was still upright, perfectly all right in a great blaze of sun despite the crash that had to be coming. And I noticed there was no more rope. He was holding his body like a surfer, but somehow different.

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Superb till the end."

Don Manuel's tone grew low and quieter, with a great seriousness. "My friend, I could not swear to you that he was not standing or riding on the dolphins, driving straight for shore. But the shore had become strange too. There was not only one *Castillo* above us, there were more. And I think in one glimpse I saw work going on — not the miserable scaffolds of the *arqueologicos*, but like building, fresh and new. And voices, people shouting, Mayas rushing down the cliff path now, rushing into the sea toward K'o. And all strangely dressed, or rather, ornamented — everything shining, colorful. But then I had no more time to look. Because you see both my motors had died.

"Oh, yes. Just as I saw him pass into the harbor, first one engine quit and then the other, dead as dogs, and I was being whirled 'round and carried across the pass entrance. Luckily — maybe unluckily — the tide was running out and took me with it. I was so crazy with confusion and *contra-natura*, things turned against nature — I did not even comprehend my own danger. Only I had the sense to seize the *palo* and push away from the most dangerous rocks — all the time the current and the tide were carrying me away — away —

"I had one last look at the glory — how did the man of old say it? —towers shining, noble as Seville? As it must have appeared so many hundreds of years ago, perhaps before it was ever seen by accursed eyes." For an instant the old Maya-mestizo, who normally called himself a Spaniard, allowed a hate I had never heard before to show. "Yes, And then when I could look again, there was nothing but our poor old Tuloom.

"Zamá, the city of the dawn, was gone forever. And K'o with it."

Here *Don* Manuel got up, poured himself another tequila, and I joined him in a weaker potion. The divers were still sleeping soundly in their *amacas*, one in every corner; from two of them came gentle snores. The sky was brightening, blooming into beauty, with a great salmon explosion ahead of us, in which lay Cozumel. I glanced back at the west; again there were the glowing cities of the sky, lavender and saffron and rose, with the faint chip of setting moon still sharply visible, and somehow alien among the softness.

"No," said *Don* Manuel, though I had not spoken. "Nothing of him was ever found. No body, no skis, not a scrap, nothing. Although everyone looked for weeks, even from the air. And — another strange thing — even the coil of rope-end in my *lancha* was gone too. I remember in the excitement I had glimpsed it seeming faint, like a mist, but I was too busy trying to save myself from wrecking to attend to that."

"How did you come ashore?"

"Well, I tell you, I thought I was

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going to Cuba. I was sure there was water or dirt in the petrol, you see, although we had strained it three times through a good *lana* hat. Oh, he overlooked nothing, that K'o! So I was sucking and blowing away, drinking petrol so I was sick, when suddenly the motor started quite normally, and then the other, which I had not even touched. So I tore right back, looking for K'o — I went into the harbor, everywhere — but there was nothing but our dead ruined old Tuloom. And one *viejo*, a sort of caretaker, who had been shooting doves. He said he had heard a motor, but he was in the *manglēs* after *palomas*, he had seen nothing. Only he crossed himself—" Here *Don* Manuel made a comic gesture — "about twenty times.

"I went back to Cozumel — the motors ran perfectly. And of course I alerted the Gardia, and all K'o's friends. But there was nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. Nothing except one thing only, which I know. Shall I tell you a strangeness, my friend?"

"You ask me? May you never find another *langusta* if you keep silent now."

"Very well." He took a deep, deep draught. "This I never told. You know our poor Tuloom, how it is famous for two things. One is of course the magnificent site, the wall and the view from the *Castillo*, correct? And do you know the other, which is in every stupid guidebook?"

"What? Not the frescoes, they are gone. A few *Chacs*, rain gods — Oh! Of course. The figure over the top door, the Descending God, or whatever you will."

"Do you know it is the only such a one in all Yucatān? In no other Maya *ruina*, even Tikal. Some fools call it the Descending God, or a setting sun, such as a few Aztec temples have up in Mexico. But this one is quite, quite different. I have made it my business to compare, you see. Even from the oldest drawings before the vandals came. You can believe me. The posture is not elegant, indeed, it is somewhat like a frog. Nevertheless, everyone except some of the *Arqueologistos*, call it not descending, but the *diving* god. The vandals have been at it, and the weather, of course. But I have consulted the old drawings, like your Catherwoods' from Stevenson's books. Have you never examined these?"

"No, not really."

"Well. Some are very detailed. The hands are held so —" *Don* Manuel put his fingers together like a diving child. "And on the wrists he drew stiff cuffs with ruffles. But these are only drawn to fill the space, I think, it was already damaged, you see. Such cuffs are never seen elsewhere. Like Spanish court cuffs, or the cuffs the little *typistas* wear to keep their sleeves clean. The real statue that you can see today has no trace of such things. But if you look carefully you can see there was indeed something there, upon the wrists. Very

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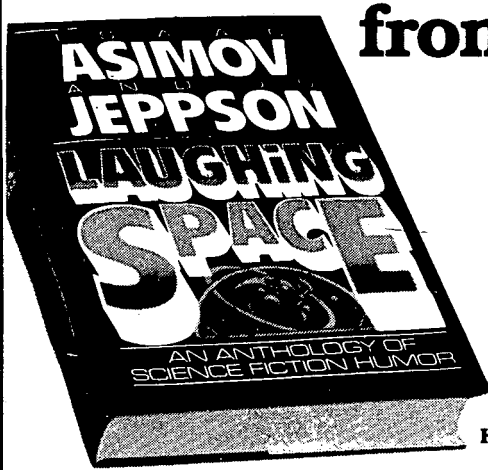

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ornamentados. But not big cuffs. One perhaps a little smaller than the other, on the left wrist. And by the wrists — you know the Maya symbols for numbers, the bars and dots, not so?"

"Yes."

"Well, a few small ones can still be made out, in the space by the diving hands. Strange wrist ornaments — figures of time? ... How would the ancients show a diver's watch, I ask you?"

"Oh, my god, Manuel."

"Exactly, my friend. His name too, did you forget? K'o, K'ou, a god!"

There fell then a long silence, in which I was unconscious of the uproar of the old engines, the groans, the creaks, the double snore. Only the dawn wind, broken by an osprey's scream, only the glorious sunrise over the marina pier, now visible ahead, from which came the almost imperceptible tinkle of a mariachi from some early riser's radio.

Presently I sighed. "So you really think he made it, *Don* Manuel?"

"I know what I have seen, my friend," Manuel said quietly. "And every word I have told you is the truth. I believe he was indeed the first man to waterski from Cozumel to the mainland. By several hundreds — perhaps, who knows? — even a thousand years. *Mille annos, mas o menus. Quien sabe?*"

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Books

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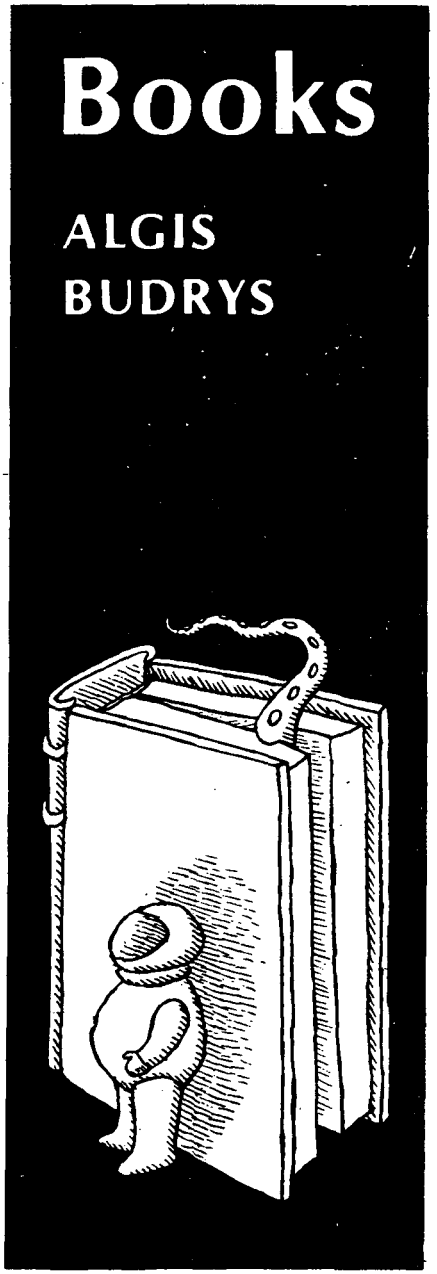

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Engines of The Night, Barry Malzberg, Doubleday, $10.95

Within the past few years, we've had several books of SF memoirs — Damon Knight's *The Futurians*, Frederik Pohl's complementary *The Way the Future Was*, Lester del Rey's SF history, Isaac Asimov's massive autobiography, and scores of large and small essays from various sources, myself included, all presented to the public as historical description. What most of them are is reminiscence sometimes informed by some small increment of research. I classify them loosely as memoirs because I think they all begin around a core of recollection, although sometimes the recollection is of someone else relating an anecdotalized memory.

Somewhere out there in this vast world is the material of a genuine comprehensive history. There are miles and miles of taped interviews, some speaking in the voices of the dead; collections of manuscripts and letters, lying yellow and half-sorted in various repositories, compiled with grants that have long since run out, waiting for some Arnold Toynbee or perhaps some Hari Seldon. Whether such a person will ever come along and whether there will ever be funding; whether anyone will ever give enough of a damn, or should, are other matters.

I think it unlikely it will ever occur. The SF boom that supported the spate of tangential work about SF in the

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1970s is over; retrenchment is everywhere, and peripheral matters are being cast overboard by a publishing establishment tending more and more plainly toward the surefire action drama of limited ambition. The next boom will be based on the audiovisual media; books will become simple transcriptions of plays written for broadcast and narrowcast, and though I do not see the shape of that phenomenon perfectly clear before me, what I do see is that the recorded history of 20th century SF will continue to consist of a great heap of deteriorating uncollated material. And considering that all the mighty great mid-century names are now well into their sixties, twenty years from now it will be possible for anyone to assert unchallenged whatever view of our times suits their purpose, damn them.

This may or may not be a tragedy. I would think there was considerable value in having a comprehensive record of the flowering of a new literature. Which is what it was, for all that we can trace ourselves back to Mary Wollstonecraft and Lukian of Samosata and a number of anonymous awestruck Egyptians and Sumerians before them.

It was in the pulp magazines and their outgrowths that the fundamental explosion of ideas occurred, in breadth and depth outstripping everything that had ever been done on the "outside," forming a universe whose sheer weight of wordage is so gargantuan that ninety-nine percent of it could be worthless and it would still contain a higher volume of brilliance and relevance than the total of all worthwhile SF ever done in any other format. It would still represent the greater output of creative energy, of intellect, aspiration, and all the penalties suffered by persons capable of responding to those qualities. I would think it a shame that in the stripped-down, quick-hit world of the 21st century, most of this would be forgotten, although in truth we are well on our way to segregating so many other things into the category of the superfluous that it might be an honor to be included in that company

Penalties. Quite so. I do not know what you make of SF, the literature, or of its literatti. I do know there is a very large establishment of culture in which it is regarded romantically, as all of literature is regarded. The fact is that the successful artist must also be possessed of a strong streak of politician and promoter in addition to the basic creative talent. And in SF, that goes double, if not triple or quadruple. In the beginning, there is not the Word, there is the Contract.

The reason we have SF is that it's profitable. A thousand Miltons might sing of alternative realities, but if there be not one publisher, they would be a thousand mutes. The publishers in turn will tell you that they are ruthlessly controlled by the distributors, and the distributors, or those among them capable of speech, will assert they op-

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erate in strict response to the dictates of the Public, as if you all shared but one head. But that's too sophisticated for me. For me, the crucial strait way through which art must pass is the publisher and the publisher's disposal of The Budget.*

I hasten to add that some of my best friends are publishers and that there is at least one in my experience whom I would allow to date my unmarried daughter, had I one. Publishers and their employees — i.e., editors and writers — come in all the usual stripes of humanity. Having spent my life among them, and being as I sit here both an editor and a publisher in two of my avatars, I have formed the bulk of my friendships and acquaintances among them. But the system operates without respect to decency; the every sip of cocktail, the den furnished in precious volumes, the ballet tickets and the children's mittens are all obtained by moving merchandise in the face of the competition. That is the inescapable governing fact, and the bottom line on that is that the genius in the garret must not deal with the possible but with the acceptable.

There are publishers and editors who will take risks, but even these operate within a mist-wrapt, half-intuitive yet nevertheless defined shadow-universe of Acceptable Risks. The borders of this domain probably are defined by The Public, and they do expand and contract. The greatest rewards for publishers, editors and writers are to be found by operations in this area, and so there is considerable incentive to constantly press upon the limitations of the acceptable.

But there is no guarantee that the rewards will fall to the actual pioneers; usually, they fall to those who hang back a little and then step carefully around the pitfalls in which the pioneers lie bleeding. So the great majority of operators in the arts play it safe; they do what has been done, and refine their methods of doing it until they have arrived at maximum return for least investment. (And let me make it clear that "operators" very much includes the writers.)

Who can blame them? Do you enveigh against the people who build your house, sew your clothes and truck your food when they insist on not going bankrupt? Setting aside the piratical and the pathologically criminal, are you surprised when they tailor their methods to the broadest common denominator? Disabuse yourself of the cultural fable that finds the arts somehow above these constraints; when we go to the store and price our children's

And if you think there is a better, nobler place, I suggest a few weeks of dealing with the "little" magazines and the academic literary establishment. For sheer concentration of hyenas, rough and smooth, there is nothing like it east of Hollywood. In fact, give me the glitter in an independent producer's eyes every time, in preference to the salivations trickling from the corners of a Literature Department chairman's jaw.

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three-ring binder paper, our dollars are the same color as anyone else's, and though you will find most of us in the cheap seats at the opera, there is no artists' discount.

But we have spoken thus far as if it were a wholly rational process. Within certain parameters it certainly is, and furthermore a process so Brobdingagian in scale and so lacking in compassion that irrational and compassionate individuals are often channelled by it into seemingly rational actions. (Psychiatrists speak of the "well-adjusted" person at this point in the discussion of the case history.) Yet the fact is that there are always individuals who are sufficiently naive, driven, or possessed of a higher rationality, so that at least some of the time they consciously or helplessly strive against the system.

These are the bleeding pioneers. They are the people who come to the store with the Scotch-taped single dollar bills. And that is their material reward for penetrating into areas whose happy exploitation will enrich others materially *and* spiritually. The spirit of the pioneers is almost inevitably broken, and never more cruelly than when they see others flowering spiritually in those newly lighted lands.

Now, on some vast psychohistorical scale, we as a whole have benefitted and in due course we shall revere the names. But that can be small comfort to the bearer of the name, whose entire universe is his own mortal lifetime. And less comfort than that to the person gripped by the terrible fear that comes when the bulk of the allotted days has clearly passed and the work is as if it had never been.

Again, stepping back into general perspective, many of these unsung heroes are incompetents or fools by any broad measure, speaking of things that will never be of great importance to anyone else, wielding blunt tools upon grotesque materials. Statistically, those who are ignored are eventually proven to have fully deserved it. There is a rough justice in lumping them in with the ephemerals who never dared nor strove and deserve the public's abandonment for that reason; a rough justice, although it represents yet another excruciation upon them.

You must understand ... well, you *must* nothing, but I pray your empathy for a moment ... you are invited to put yourself into the place of the artist whose actual talent may be the supervening conviction of being possessed by talent. And who among us, really, is quite as good at what he does as he believes he is? Even among those who *can* perform somewhere within the most elasticized bounds of the acceptable or the potentially acceptable or the eventually accepted, the self-appraisal of what has been attained always by some measure outruns what has actually been attained. So though I invite your attention to the extreme case, I beg you to note that what is wholly true for the extreme is to some extent true for all. We cannot know

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how much we are really doing. Some of us may not be doing anything; we may secretly feel our deserts are just.

And some feel it deeply and constantly. Without respect to what they "deserve." No one knows or ever has known what an artist deserves. But each individual artist has a pretty clear idea of his or her just portion.

Now, most of us who signed up to labor in this vineyard had a reasonably lucid concept of how it would be. All this pathos is not essentially different, to me for instance, from the frustrations and injustices inherent in all careers. Like the clerk, the cook, the trucker, the doctor, the lawyer, the Indian chief, we know or soon learn that the successful course is the result of an interminable series of collisions and that the best pilot is the one with the best sense for the rebound. Like most writers, I make my way, take my lumps, sing my songs, and would not do anything else with my life. There are moments of black despair, yes. There were moments of black despair when I was washing dishes in a luncheonette, and when I was out on the road selling Transtars; I suspect you have had one or two yourself. It appears to be a feature of the human condition, and just as every triumph has its component of bitterness, so every dark hour takes some of its weight from its contrast with sunnier days. Forgive me for reciting what we all know; some of us recite what the overwhelming majority would rather not.

Some of us will not accept rough justice across the statistical mean; will not, in looking around at their own universe, take much heart from the thought that the universe at large will go rebounding on, or that the odds may be their own tomorrow will be better. And that brings us, I would say, to Barry Malzberg.

Barry N. Malzberg is the author of twenty-six and a half published SF novels and uncounted similar works outside the field, as well as the editor or part-editor of nine anthologies — some of them major — and the promulgator of eight collections of his short work. He is an award-winner, and the author of a great many stories anthologized by notable editors. And he is largely Out of Print.

No one who has read more than a few sentences of his work can doubt that he is possessed of uncommon gifts of intelligence and inspiration. He can also clearly be seen to be operating from concerns and within intellectual constructs that are frequently unique to him and never conventional. In *The Engines of The Night*, a book like no other SF memoir, and a book which I venture to predict will be bludgeoned for unseemliness, he frankly and justifiably holds himself out to be an artist with all the credentials for high status in the field. But he does not have that status, and he presents that fact to us as an indictment.

I plead guilty. Not on your behalf

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— that is your business — but personally, on my behalf, I so plead.

Guilty to the minor count that I don't like his work.

Guilty to the major count that I can't even respond to his work as a general rule. In that place within me where stories claim participation on some emotional level — and that's what I read stories for — I have made no contact with a piece of Malzberg prose far more often than I have found myself engaged. And I suspect that what contact I have made is with those cases where for one reason or another he chose to write down to some level below his best.

And so I plead guilty to not having done what I might to make his days easier. I haven't lent my voice to his cause to any appreciable extent, I haven't brought to you my appreciations of what he was doing — because I can't fathom what he is doing — and what praise I've publicly given his efforts over the years has been qualified on the spot or negated at the next occasion.

This time, although my praise is full of niggles, it is unqualified. Although it takes an essay to make that fact contextually clear and we are yet some ways from concluding it.

From time to time, editors send me advance manuscripts, soliciting (I assume) favorable comments which will be duly excerpted on the covers of the produced book. You have heard me attack this practice when others participate in it, and I don't go for it often, in part on grounds of conviction, in part because I'd look a right hypocrite doing it under the circumstances. But on the back cover of *The Engines of The Night* you will find a quote from my letter of response to Pat LoBrutto, Doubleday's risk-taking editor on this project, as follows:

> "Destined to be misunderstood and mis-used, this cry from the heart will prove once more that honesty is suicidal. Not a work of reference; a work of brilliance."

The second sentence of that declaration also appears separately, on the front cover. I suspect it is the most marketable quote LoBrutto was able to generate. Gregory Benford, Sam Moskowitz and Alexei Panshin are also excerpted on the back cover, and the Moskowitz and Panshin openly come as close to damning with faint praise as I have ever seen in too many years of running my eyes over such effusions. Yet it is appropriate for LoBrutto to have put these seemingly inappropriate statements there, because although the book is subtitled "Science Fiction in the Eighties," it would be ridiculous to market it as history or objective criticism. It is what Panshin calls it: "...a personal bitch about Barry's existential situation."

But if we consider the premise that there is something general to be considered in Malzberg's personal situation, then a big and valuable bitch it is. An unignorable bitch.

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But it will be ignored. For the most part, I expect, by taking it to task for not being what it is not, and thus dismissing it. In any case, the major effort will be to get the bad taste out of everyone's mouth as soon as possible.

What it is is a collection of essays, a compendium of the series Barry has been running in a variety of professional and semiprofessional journals. They are commentaries on the state of the art, the condition of the establishment, and other ancillaries to SF literature, prompted by autobiographical references. The concluding self-contained selection, "Corridors," is a harrowing semifictionalized depiction of one Ruthven, SF author, on the occasion of his greatest recognition by the SF establishment. It sums up, in hair-raising verisimilitude, all the assertions that have gone before; if there was ever any doubt that Malzberg could write effectively, it is expunged here. He will be made to pay for that.

I mentioned unseemliness. Producing such a piece of work is unseemly; it declares there is a veil between those who produce SF and those who read it; it demonstrates such a veil, and it rips it aside. This sort of thing is not done, anymore than it is generally considered good form to catch the sleeves of passersby, crying "Look, I am in agony!" for any reason. Staying with the particular case of Malzberg and SF, that case is an aggravated case of lesser, more private utterances which, made occasionally by others, invariably are met by frosty stares and elevated noses among the peerage assembled. The feeling in the professional community, taken as an entity, is that we all knew what we were getting into.

Whatever it was. Expressed to SF fandom as an entity, or to the larger SF audience as an entity, a performance like Malzberg's here is simplistically characterized as Biting the Hand that Feeds You, and none of us want to be caught within a hundred paces of anyone performing such an act. Or, none of us want to be seen being caught within that radius of contamination.

This of course presumes that there is A Hand, analogous to that One Head. You know better, but there are plenty of people selling SF who do not dare trust it true that you actually have your own faces. Utterances like Malzberg's put such people in a panic, and always have, and since this utterance is by far the most powerful and systematic we have ever had...

The point is not whether you have ever made substantial contact with what Barry N. Malzberg has signed his name to so many times, though the point takes some of its sharpness from the fact that the work could clearly be seen to be systematic, informed, and (mysteriously) compelling.*

**I don't like it, by and large I've never liked it, and I've always felt myself drawn into it by what may or may not be the same quality that makes maniacs endlessly fascinating. But the only maniac whose utterances have any permanent effect on me is myself.*

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The point is not whether Malzberg is "right." If we were to wait for a determination on that, we would wait forever, and every minute of that time would have been devoted to affirming one of Malzberg's central bases for his indictment of us. It's not a matter of objective "right." It's that there *is* no objective "right." There is the compulsion to press upon the borders.

The point is not whether Malzberg "deserves" better than the series of circumstances he claims have acted to crush his career; if we begin adjudicating merit on any basis outside the marketplace, we are in with the department chairmen, many of whom are doubtless noble and well-intentioned.

The point is that someone who is no dodo has constructed a format within which he can prove to his own satisfaction that the SF establishment eats its own, that its expressed ideals are hypocrisy, its mores Philistine, its punishments savage and its rewards insulting, and that, unlike some other memorialists, when he displays his torn jugular with shocking insistence, whoever tore it, it is not ketchup flowing freely from the wound.

Of its merits as a compendium containing facts, I have spoken in short-term language. I will get a letter from him at least on this point, but some of his major theses cite "facts" which are not facts ... a matter which is totally irrelevant in this context, because he could just as easily have cited parallel evidence which *is* valid, case for case, and in any event his conclusions are, case for case, dead on for connotation. There is no point quibbling, though some will do so and elevate their criticisms into some assertion that they are thereby disproving his claim.

This claim cannot be disproved. By going from tiny detail to tiny detail, patiently, some would say obsessively, Malzberg forecloses all possibility that he does not feel what he says he feels.

And if he stands there, as he does, feeling this way, he is his own best evidence. One of our pioneers is showing the bad taste to speak from his pit; although others lie silent or chuckling in their own traps, from prudence or befuddlement or because they are busy digging their way out to try again, this one does not. And I suspect no one knows better than he that in some larger view of matters, he may be making an Awful Mistake; not of mere manners, but in the direction of his only life, in how he shaped his gift to us, and in who among us he chose to present it to in particular.

We don't know, we can't know whether in the larger scheme the agony of Barry N. Malzberg is trivial. The thought that it might not be trivial has implications that are not to be borne if possible. But in any case, think now how much we need the concept of that comprehensive history which we shall likely never have. And, oh, *ave atque vale!*

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Damon Knight is writing short fiction again, and that is welcome news. His last story for F&SF was "I See You" in the special Knight issue (November 1976), and his latest is the offbeat and entertaining pastiche below. We have another coming up soon.

Tarcan of the Hoboes

BY

DAMON KNIGHT

In the spring of the year 19--, John Clayton and his pregnant young wife set out on a journey by railroad from Boston to Los Angeles, where Clayton had been offered a post as manager of an orange plantation. Clayton's father, the banker Cyrus T. Clayton, was a millionaire many times over, but it was his wish that his son earn his own way in the world rather than become a playboy or ne'er-do-well; therefore Clayton and his bride were poor, but their hopes were high. On the third day, as Clayton was taking the air in the vestibule, he happened to observe the conductor and a porter standing close together just inside the next car. Words were exchanged which Clayton could not hear; then the conductor, whose face was empurpled with rage, struck the porter and knocked him down.

Clayton stepped across to the vestibule of the next car and opened the door. The porter, with blood on his lip, was trying to rise, and the conductor had drawn back his foot to kick him.

"Look here," said Clayton quietly, removing his pipe from his mouth, "This won't do, you know."

The conductor turned to him with a foul oath. "You're only a d----d passenger," he said. "Keep out of this, if you know what's good for you, Mr. Clayton."

The porter, meanwhile, got to his feet and slunk away, casting a malevolent glance back over his shoulder at the conductor.

"I may be only a passenger, as you say," Clayton said, "But if I observe any such conduct again, I shall report you."

The conductor, who was obviously drunk, stared at him sullenly with his

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reddened eyes, then turned with another oath and stalked away.

At breakfast the following morning, Clayton saw a little knot of waiters in close conversation at the end of the car. As Clayton and his wife were rising to leave, one of the waiters approached them casually and murmured in Clayton's ear, "Black Bart says, you keep in your compartment today."

"What did that man say, dear?" inquired Alice. "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing," said Clayton lightly, but once they were in their compartment he took her hands and said earnestly, "Dearest, I'm afraid there's going to be trouble on the train. Don't lose heart. We must just wait and trust in God's mercy."

"I'm going to be brave," said Alice, and they sat down together, with hands clutched tightly. After an hour had passed, they heard a loud report from the forward end of the train; then another, then a fusillade, followed by deathly silence.

The Claytons waited, with straining ears and beating hearts. At last the door was flung open, and in the aperture appeared a porter with a revolver in his hand. "Wanted in the rear," he said. He would not reply to their anxious questions, but herded them down the corridor. When they reached the dining car, a terrible sight met their eyes. All the other passengers were there, crowded between the tables, with their hands bound behind them, while two waiters rifled their pockets, throwing wallets, watches and coins into a bag held by a third ruffian.

"What is the meaning of this?" Clayton cried, turning to the porter who had escorted them. "Where is the conductor?"

The man's face split in an evil grin. "The *meaning* is, we've took the train, see? We've threw the conductor off, *and* the engineer and the fireman, see? So stand right there and keep your d----d traps shut, or it'll be worse for you."

Clayton put his arm around his trembling wife and they wached as the porters, having finished their thievery, began to herd the bound passengers toward the farther end of the car. At first they did not understand the dreadful thing that was about to take place; then they heard a chorus of shrieks, and, turning to look out the window, saw three passengers tumbling down the embankment as the train hurtled on. The grisly scene was repeated, again and again, until the last passenger was gone: only the Claytons remained.

Toward them now came the man Clayton had seen knocked down by the conductor. Beside him was the man with the bag of stolen valuables.

"Give me your wallet," said the porter, holding out his hand, "you won't need it."

"This is an outrage," said Clayton, but he handed over his watch and wallet.

"Speak polite when Black Bart talks

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to you," said the man with the bag. "Now the lady — purse and rings." Alice gave him the articles he requested, but when he pointed to the locket she wore on a chain around her neck, she shrank away. "No, please not that," she protested. "It is the dearest thing I own — a present from my husband. It has no value to you, but to me it is worth more than gold or diamonds."

"Give it to him, dear, you must," said Clayton, but Black Bart pushed the bagman aside. "Keep the locket," he said gruffly to Alice, and pulled the emergency cord. After a moment they heard the squeal of brakes, and the car rocked as the train slowed down.

"Bring their luggage," said Black Bart, and a porter scurried away.

"What do you intend doing with us?" Clayton demanded.

"Putting you off the train, but you'll land soft, not like them others. You done me a good turn once, and Black Bart don't forget."

"I don't like it," said another man, shouldering forward. "I say tie their hands and shove them over the side like the rest." There was a murmur of agreement from the other mutineers.

"What's this?" said Bart, turning slowly around. There was a revolver in his hand. "You boys elected me conductor, didn't you? Well, I'm the conductor, and what I say goes."

"Maybe it don't. Suppose we unelect you, Bart, and throw you over too?"

Bart's expression did not change, but his fist shot out and cracked against the other man's jaw. The ruffian fell without a sound and sprawled senseless on the floor.

"Anybody else?" demanded Bart, glaring around. The mutineers were silent.

"Now listen," said Bart, bringing his unshaven face close to Clayton's. "When we stop, get off quick, because I can't keep this scum in line forever. You'll have your luggage, and you'll find some tools in one of the suitcases. I'm giving you a chance, and that's the best I can do."

"But my God, man," cried Clayton, glancing at the desolate landscape outside, "this is murder."

The porter appeared with their bags just as the train ground to a halt. "Quick now, or I won't answer for it," said Black Bart.

Herded by a gun in the porter's hands, Clayton and his bride stumbled down onto the rough grade of the railway. Their luggage lay in the weeds below, where the porter had thrown it. No sooner were they clear of the train than it began to move again, gathering speed so quickly that in a few moments the caboose was rushing by them; then the train dwindled in the distance. They watched it until it was only a spot on the horizon.

The Claytons looked about them. They were in the middle of a great wilderness, the heartland of the continent. Not far off there was a little stream,

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around which trees grew thickly; except for these, and a few other wooded spots, and the railway track itself, there was nothing to break the vast immensity.

"Dearest, what are we to do?" asked Alice.

"Never mind, my dear," said Clayton, although his heart was sinking within him. "We have our luggage, after all, and we have each other."

In one of the suitcases, as Black Bart had promised, he found a set of tools, some nails, screws, and hinges, together with a long-barreled revolver and a box of cartridges, an American flag, some fishing lines and hooks, and other useful things. With the tools, Clayton built a rude shelter in a tree, covering it with blankets draped over branches, and there he and Alice spent their first shivering, lonely night in the wilderness.

On the following day a freight train came hurtling out of the west; Clayton took off his shirt and tried to flag it down, but it roared past and was gone in a cloud of cinders. He knew that Alice's time must be near and that it would be dangerous for her to travel afoot. That day he began the construction of a sturdier house in the tree, and in the intervals of his labor he showed Alice how to catch grasshoppers for bait and fish in the stream.

Clayton finished the cabin before the end of the week, and none too soon, for he had glimpsed a cougar in the distance. The next night they heard the beast prowling around their tree, and although Clayton tried to calm her, Alice's courage broke when the forest animal climbed the trunk and clawed at the door. That night she bore her child, a boy, while the cougar snarled and snuffled outside.

Alice never recovered completely from the shock of bearing a child in these rude surroundings; she grew steadily weaker and her lucid moments farther apart. At last, three weeks after the birth of the child, she died.

Clayton buried her under a willow beside the stream. Her locket, which contained miniature portraits of her and himself, he kept to remember her by, and he tried to calm the child by swinging the pretty thing back and forth over his crib.

Miles away, in a hobo jungle along the tracks where the freights slowed to climb a steep grade, another boy-child had been born. The mother was Fat Karla, and the father was Big Jim Korchak, who called himself King of the Hoboes. There were others who claimed the title, but wherever Korchak was, he was king. Six feet four and broad in proportion, hairy, dirty, and foul-tempered, Korchak enforced his rule by the weight of his hamlike fists.

He and a half-dozen of his followers had encamped in this desolate place when Karla's time came upon her; now the victuals were run-

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ning short, and so was Korchak's temper.

From the hills they had seen a thread of smoke rising far out on the plain, day after day. "Where there's smoke there's folks," said Korchak. "And where there's folks there's grub." So the little band set out, with Korchak at the head as usual, and Karla in the rear carrying her little bundle. The child was fretful, and Karla lagged behind to nurse him. At last Korchak lost his patience; whirling on her, and scattering the other 'boes with his fists, he snarled, "Rotten little brat, what's the use of him anyway?" He plucked the child from its mother's arms and flung it down on the tracks. With a moan, Karla snatched the pitiful bundle up again, but it was too late: the child was dead.

All the rest of that day Karla stumbled along like one demented, clutching the poor little body to her breast. She never spoke, but if any of the other 'boes came near her she backed away snarling, and even Korchak did not approach her again to try to take the child away.

Toward evening they came to the forest by the little stream where John Clayton had built his hut. Softly the men crept up the tree. They listened but heard nothing. Korchak swung himself up through the branches, followed by the others.

John Clayton raised his head from his arms just in time to see the giant hobo fling the door open and rush in. He rose to defend himself, but one terrific blow felled him. He lay on the floor, his neck broken.

The other 'boes were hurrying about the room, ransacking it of its pitiful possessions, but Karla leaped to the crib where the infant, awakened by the struggle, was beginning to wail. She snatched it up, dropping her own dead infant as she did so, and rushed out of the house. The others caught up with her a little way down the track, but Karla would not suffer any of them to come near her. She had another child now, and she would keep it.

In hobo jungles from Natchez to Point Barrow, the boy grew up sturdy and strong. His mother called him George, but because the bottoms of his ragged britches were always black from sitting on the railroad ties, the hoboes called him "Tarcan," and the name stuck. He learned to use a knife and a slingshot with such deadly accuracy that even the biggest 'boes dared not challenge him; he learned to board a freight at a grade crossing and how to leap from a moving train without injury; he learned which bulls to avoid, and which jails were the warmest in winter. The locket that had been his mother's he wore always under his dirty shirt; he did not know who the pictured people were, but he thought the man looked kind, and the woman beautiful.

When Tarcan was sixteen, Karla died, a used-up old woman; Korchak

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had wandered away long since. Tarcan went on alone.

Every year or two his wanderings brought him back to the place where he had been born. On one of these occasions, roaming the forest beside the track, he stumbled over the abandoned tree house and went in. Marauding animals had scattered the bones of two skeletons, one of a full-grown man and the other of an infant. Mice and squirrels had done their work with blankets, papers, and the few scraps of worn-out clothing the 'boes had left, but in a closed cabinet Tarcan found a diary, which he could not read, and a children's book, grimed with the prints of tiny fingers. With the packrat instinct of the hobo, he put both books away in his bindle; he ransacked the little cabin for anything else of value, but found nothing except a tiny leather-bound folder.

Later, crouched by his fire in the jungle, he pored over the children's book with its faded pictures. Tarcan could read, after a fashion: he knew "RR Xing," and "Cafe," "City Limits," and a few more words, but this was the first book he had ever tried to read. Although he was untaught, his keen intelligence enabled him to make rapid progress. Soon he was able to read such sentences as "The boy runs after the spotted dog." Next he turned his attention to the leather folder, and after a few attempts discovered the secret of its metal clasp and opened it. Inside were two photographs, one of a man, the other of a woman: and he knew their faces. With leaping heart, Tarcan withdrew the locket which he wore around his neck and compared the pictured faces: they were the same.

Karla had told him nothing about his birth except that his father had been a gent, and that the locket had belonged to him. Was the man who had died in the lonely tree house, then, Tarcan's father? How had he died, and why had his bones been left for marauding bobcats and coyotes?

Perhaps the other book would give some clue. He opened it eagerly, but it was written in an angular script which at first defeated him. Gradually he began to realize that the letters, unfamiliar as they were, were distorted forms of the printed alphabet. Slowly, sentence by sentence, he puzzled out the diary and read its pathetic story.

When he had done so, he was more bewildered than before. He, Tarcan, could not be the infant the diary spoke of, for its bones were scattered on the floor of the cabin along with its father's. There was no mention of another child, or of Karla.

Many times after that he came back to the deserted cabin and sat there to brood, reading the diary over and over again and hoping that somehow it would disclose its secret. One day, as he sat thus pensive, he heard the hoot of an approaching express, then a terrific crash. Running outside, he beheld an appalling sight: the train had been derailed and its cars lay buckled and

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overturned up and down the right of way.

On a fine summer evening, Charles Clayton, nephew of Cyrus T. Clayton and heir to the Clayton banking millions, sat comfortably in his private train en route from San Francisco to Boston. With him as his guests were Professor Archimedes Q. Potter and his daughter Jane, and a young French naval officer, Paul D'Arnot. D'Arnot, on Clayton's advice, had converted his personal fortune into gold, obtained at the San Francisco mint; the bullion, in a sealed chest, was locked in the baggage compartment.

After a supper of roast pheasant under glass prepared by Clayton's personal chef, the party was preparing to retire to their luxurious compartments for the night when there was a tremendous crash; the car toppled over on its side as if struck by a giant hammer, and the stunned occupants lay dazed on the floor.

Clayton was the first to regain his senses. Struggling to his feet, he ascertained that D'Arnot and the Potters were uninjured; then the two young men succeeded in opening a window and helping the others out. By climbing down the undercarriage of the toppled car, they were able to reach the track.

The sight that met their eyes was daunting. The engine and the coal car were still on the tracks, but the sleeping and dining cars, the saloon and the baggage car lay overturned like a child's toys. All around them lay a vast wasteland, the heart of America.

"My heavens!" ejaculated Professor Potter, fumbling for his glasses, which he had lost in the crash. "What has occurred? Why is the train no longer upright?"

"We have had a crash, Professor," responded Clayton. "Miss Potter, are you sure you are all right?"

"Yes," said the girl faintly, pressing her hand to her brow, "only a little dizzy, I think."

"Sit down here, please, and you, too, Professor, while Paul and I see if the others need help." Clayton and D'Arnot started off toward the engine, but at this moment the engineer and the fireman dropped to the cinders and came toward them. "What happened, McTaggart?" Clayton called.

"I don't know, sir," responded the engineer, a gruff Scot. "It looks to me as if the roadbed gave way, sir, just after the engine passed over it. The maintenance of this line is something shocking, sir, saving your presence."

It was decided that the engineer and the fireman would proceed to the nearest station and get help. "There is no room for anyone in the cab," Clayton explained, "and you, Miss Potter, cannot ride in a coal car." Accordingly, when the engine and the coal car had been uncoupled, the fireman got up steam and the engine moved rapidly off into the distance.

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Tarcan watched from the trees as the little party entered the forest and began exploring. Presently they stumbled over the cabin in the tree, and excited shouts rang back and forth. Water was brought from the stream, and the chef began to prepare a late snack. Jane was to sleep in the cabin, while the men wrapped themselves in blankets on the ground. There were five: Clayton, Professor Potter. D'Arnot, the chef, and a rat-faced baggageman.

That night, as he lay in his sleeping bag watching the cabin, Tarcan saw a flicker of movement near the train; a pale glint of light showed between the trees. His curiosity aroused, he crept closer. Down toward the stream a human figure was moving, dim in the starlight: a faint ray of light, as if from a shielded flashlight, preceded it. As Tarcan noiselessly approached, he saw that it was the baggageman, carrying some bulky object in his arms. The man stumbled over a root with a muffled curse, regained his balance, and at last set his burden down. Presently Tarcan heard the clink of a spade. He crept as near as he dared, and saw the man digging a hole at the foot of a great tree. When he was done, he lowered a brass-bound chest into the hole, covered it with dirt, then with leaves and branches. Having done so, and rested a moment from his exertions, the baggageman retreated toward the camp.

Tarcan waited until he was gone, then dug up the chest and filled the hole with rocks and earth. The chest was locked; he could not tell what was in it, but from its weight he knew it must be valuable. He carried it deeper into the forest and buried it again.

On the following afternoon, while the men were busy gathering firewood, he saw the golden-haired girl leave the cabin and stroll off through the woods. He pursued her, at a distance. He saw her dip her fingers in the little stream; he saw her pause to examine a patch of forget-me-nots and press the blossoms against her cheek. She wandered to the edge of the woods and strolled out into the meadow beyond. The air was balmy, and she took off her sun-hat and let it trail in her fingers. Tarcan followed, crouching low, ready to drop and conceal himself in the grasses, but she seemed oblivious of his presence.

They came to a low hill, and Jane went on into the valley beyond. Hastening to catch up, Tarcan beheld a horrifying sight. Jane Potter was standing in the open, transfixed with terror, while a tawny cougar crept toward her.

Tarcan leaped forward, shouting, "Run!" For a moment she hesitated, half-turning toward him; then, too late, she began to move. The cougar was hurtling after her, a streak of golden fur.

Tarcan's slingshot was in his hand; he fitted a stone to it without pausing in his career, and let fly. The missile

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struck the cougar's shoulder and bowled it over, but it was up at once, snarling. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Jane had tripped or fallen. But he had no time to spare for her: the cougar, with a scream of rage, was springing directly toward him. Another man might have lost his nerve and fled before that juggernaut of feline fury, but Tarcan coolly stood his ground. He took another stone from his pocket, fitted it into the slingshot, took deliberate aim. The stone struck the charging animal squarely in the forehead, and it rolled over, dead, almost at his feet.

Only then did he turn his attention to the prostrate girl. She was sitting up, her face pale. "You've saved my life," she breathed as he came closer. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Can you walk?"

"I think so." She took his hand and struggled up to her feet, only to collapse again with a little moan. Tarcan's strrong arm went around her, holding her up. "It's my ankle," she said, "I think I must have sprained it."

Tarcan said nothing, but picked her up in his arms as lightly as if she were a child. He crossed the little valley, climbed the hill beyond. At first she was tense with alarm, but after a time she relaxed and let her golden head fall against his shoulder. With the hill behind them, she could not see the railroad tracks, and did not know that he was carrying her in the opposite direction. The sun, dipping toward the western horizon, might have warned her that something was wrong, but Jane Potter, the daughter of an absent-minded Boston professor, was not schooled in the ways of the wilderness.

For a long time they did not speak. Then, "I don't even know your name," she said.

"They call me Tarcan."

"How odd! Is that your real name?"

"Yes." He carried her to the next little stand of trees, and past it to another. Jane raised her head and looked around. "Surely this isn't the right place," she said. "Are we lost?"

Tarcan, who was never lost, said nothing. In the next patch of forest, where a little tributary stream ran, he carried her by a forest trail to a secluded clearing and set her down. It was dark now in the woods; the light was almost gone.

The girl shrank against the bole of a tree and watched as Tarcan opened the bundle he carried on his back. He withdrew a scrap of cloth and tore it into strips with his strong fingers. How strange he was, this silent forest man! Yet she sensed deep within her that he meant her no harm.

With gentle fingers he probed her injured ankle. It was slightly swollen, and painful, but no bones were broken. He bound it with the cloth, then stood up. "You're not leaving?" she asked in alarm.

"Just a minute," he said curtly, and disappeared into the trees.

In a few moments he was back, car-

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rying a heap of branches in his arms. With the smaller twigs he built a tiny fire, and with the longer ones he began to construct a rude shelter, leaning the branches together and tying them with twine. When the little fire had died to embers, he opened two cans of pork and beans and heated them. They ate in silence; then Tarcan drew a waterproof poncho from his bindle and draped it across the shelter for a roof. "Time for bed," he said.

The girl hestitated, for she was alone in the wilderness with an unknown man. Tarcan seemed to sense what she was thinking; he took out his clasp knife, opened it and handed it to her, handle first. She crept into the rude shelter, where Tarcan had made a bed of fragrant leaves, and saw him stretch out on the ground in his sleeping bag.

When the men at camp realized that Jane was missing, they ran about calling her name futilely until the cook discovered a clue: Jane's dainty handkerchief, dropped beside the trail. They gathered to look at the little scrap of cloth, mute witness to a tragedy. "Give me some food, please, in a knapsack or suitcase," said old Professor Potter sadly. "I shall go into the wilderness after my daughter, and if I do not find her I shall not return."

"Professor, pardon me, that will not do," said Paul D'Arnot. "You have lost your glasses and cannot see even a foot in front of your face. It is I who shall go, and I promise that I shall bring your daughter home safely."

"And I, too," cried Clayton.

"*Mon ami*, a word in your ear," said the Frenchman quietly, and drew Clayton aside. "If we should both go, who will guard the Professor from harm? There are savage animals here, and besides, to be frank, I do not like the look of your baggageman."

After some discussion, it was agreed that D'Arnot would go in search of the missing girl, and that if he did not return in two days, the rest would go in search of him; meanwhile, if Jane should return, Clayton would fire a pistol in order to alert him. D'Arnot, with a few provisions hastily thrust into a traveling case, slipped into the forest.

D'Arnot guessed that the girl had followed the path beside the stream, but he did not see the traces where she had wandered away from it; he pursued the stream, therefore, and at nightfall he made camp miles distant from the place where Tarcan and Jane lay.

On the following day he pressed on into the wilderness, heavy of heart, for he did not believe that Jane would ever be found. The sun was low when, in a little clearing, he stopped short. Facing him across the greensward, motionless and menacing, was a gigantic coyote. Seeing his hesitation, the beast bared its fangs and charged.

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D'Arnot was a brave man, but he was unarmed. He sprang for the nearest tree and scrambled up it. Then, in a moment of horror, he realized that a branch to which he had trusted his weight was rotten; it parted with a sickening crack and D'Arnot plummeted to the ground. His head struck a stone, and he knew no more.

In the morning Tarcan examined the girl's ankle and found it still swollen; he picked her up again and started back toward the camp. Jane lay in his arms with a feeling of perfect trust, glancing up now and then through her lashes at his strong, soiled face. She fell into a daydream; she wished the journey might last forever.

All too soon, she saw that they were approaching the camp. Tarcan set her down gently and said, "You'll be all right now."

"Jane!" came a joyful shout, and she saw the little group hurrying toward her. "We've all been so worried," cried Clayton, "but here you are safe and sound!"

"Yes, thanks to Mr. —" She turned around to introduce Tarcan, but he was gone.

The others gathered around her, and old Professor Potter pressed her to his trembling breast, murmuring, "My child! My child!"

"But where is D'Arnot?" Clayton said suddenly.

"I don't understand — isn't Monsieur D'Arnot here?"

In a few words they explained what had happened, and Clayton, recollecting himself with a start, drew out his pistol and fired it repeatedly into the air. The echoes of the reports died away into silence. "He will hear the signal and come," said Clayton.

"But what if he does not? Suppose something dreadful has happened to him? Oh, dear, and it would be my fault!"

Tarcan, who had been listening in the shelter of the trees, turned and walked away from the camp. He did not know this D'Arnot, but Jane was concerned about him, and that was enough. He found the Frenchman's footprints quickly in the soft earth along the stream, and followed them. He saw where Jane had turned aside, and how the Frenchman, missing the almost imperceptible traces of her passage, had continued along the bank. By late afternoon, moving more swiftly and surely than D'Arnot had, he had found the latter's dead campfire. Pausing only to eat a can of beans, he pressed on. The sun was low when he stepped into a clearing and beheld an appalling sight. The man he sought was in the act of toppling from a tree, while a slavering coyote advanced toward him.

With Tarcan, to think was to act. As he ran forward, he drew his clasp knife from his pocket and opened the deadly blade. The great beast turned at

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his approach and launched itself in a snarling attack. The impact bowled Tarcan over, but even as he fell beneath the wieght of the ferocious beast, his knife drank deep. With a shuddering convulsion, the coyote fell dead.

He found D'Arnot unconscious beneath the tree, with a great bloody welt on his forehead. Tarcan dragged him out of the underbrush carefully, and made sure he had no broken bones; but the blow to his head was injury enough, and it was plain that the man was in no condition to be moved. Tarcan made a bed of branches for the wounded man, built a rude shelter over him, and laid a cold compress on his head. As evening fell, he butchered the coyote and cooked some of the meat in a tin can; it would make a nourishing stew. The rest of the carcass he carried several hundred yards downstream and tossed into the undergrowth, lest it attract other predators.

That night, indeed, other coyotes found the carcass, tore it apart and dragged the remnants away, so that on the following afternoon, when Clayton and his party reached the spot they saw that D'Arnot's footprints led to a great bloody smear in the shrubbery. Sadly they returned to their camp, and sadly, two days later, they boarded the rescue train which had been sent by McTaggart.

Meanwhile, D'Arnot lay for two days in delirium while Tarcan patiently nursed him. It was three weeks before the Frenchman was strong enough to travel, and during that time the two men became fast friends. Tarcan showed D'Arnot his treasures, including the locket, the folder with its two photographs, the journal and the children's book. D'Arnot read them with fascination. "But, *mon dieu*," he exclaimed, "this means that you yourself, and not Clayton, are the heir to millions!"

"That can't be," said Tarcan. "The baby's bones were there."

"Let me see," said the Frenchman, taking the children's book again. "Here are the fingerprints of that baby. Now let us examine yours." Taking a sheet of paper from his pocket, he pressed Tarcan's fingertips upon it one after another. There was no need for ink; Tarcan's fingers were grimy enough. When the task was done, the Frenchman minutely compared the prints with the aid of a pocket magnifying glass. "It is possible," he muttered. "But we must be sure — too much is at stake. Let me borrow this book, my friend, and when we get back to civilization I will show it to a policeman that I know. He will tell us."

A few days later Tarcan pronounced D'Arnot fit to travel, and the two friends retraced their steps to the lonely cabin beside the railroad track. It was empty, but on the desk Tarcan found an envelope bearing his name in a feminine hand. Tearing it open, he read:

Dear Tarcan,

We all wanted to thank you for your kindness, but the rescue

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train has arrived and we must go. If you are ever in Boston, please call on me.

Jane Potter

He showed the note to D'Arnot. "And will you accept the invitation?" the Frenchman inquired.

Tarcan shook his head. "She's rich, and I'm a 'bo."

"My friend, once I was rich too, and if only I had the chest which was stolen from me, there would be plenty for both of us; but, alas—"

"What chest is that?" Tarcan asked abruptly. D'Arnot explained about the chest of gold that had mysteriously disappeared from the train. Tarcan, in turn, told him of the scene he had witnessed. "I dug the chest up and buried it again, like a packrat," he said. "We'll get it, and then you'll be rich."

"*We* shall be rich, *mon ami*! Do you think I spoke in jest? No, half of all I have is yours!"

Tarcan dug up the chest and they set out along the track until they reached the grade, several miles away, where the fast freights slowed down. They boarded the first train and rode it as far as the nearest station, where D'Arnot paid for the rest of their passage to Boston, and also bought a full set of clothing and luggage for each of them. Bathed, shaved, and dressed in the fashion, Tarcan was, D'Arnot declared, the picture of a gentleman; but his manner left something to be desired.

"*Mon Dieu!*" the Frenchman remarked, "you must not eat pork chops in your fingers, Tarcan! Do as I do." Tarcan copied him patiently, and soon learned to eat as daintily as any aristocrat.

Arriving in Boston, they found that the Potters had left for their summer cottage in Brattleboro. D'Arnot had business in the city, including a visit to the policeman he had mentioned, but Tarcan could not wait; he hired a car and set out for Vermont.

Jane Potter was in a quandary. Clayton, who had accompanied them to the summer cottage, had been increasingly attentive of late, and she knew, with the intuition of womankind, that he was about to propose. Clayton loved her; he was young, handsome, rich, and he would do his best to make her happy: but her heart was with the strange forest man who had borne her off into the wilderness.

"Dear Jane," Clayton said to her when they were alone that afternoon — "I may call you Jane, mayn't I? You must know, dear, how I feel about you. I want you to marry me. Won't you say yes?"

"Yes," she said.

Afterward, pleading a headache, she retired to her room and waited until the others had gone off on their various errands; then she strolled out of the house into a little wood that ran along the railroad track. The scene reminded her of her forest love, and she wandered deeper into the trees,

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unaware of the black cloud that hung ominously on the horizon.

When at last she smelled the smoke and saw it drifting through the trees, it was too late. She stumbled away from the oncoming flames, only to find another line of fire racing across her path. Suddenly she heard her name called; a tall stranger was running toward her. Without a word he caught her up in his arms and bounded back the way he had come.

On the railroad track, a little distance away, stood a small handcar. The stranger deposited her on it without ceremony, climbed aboard himself, and began to pump. It was only then that Jane saw his face clearly. "You!" she said.

"Yes, me, Tarcan."

"And you've saved my life again!" she marveled.

"Not yet," said Tarcan grimly. On both sides of the railway, trees were blazing fiercely; flaming bits of debris rained upon them, and they were blinded by smoke. Then, little by little, the flames receded, and they were hurtling down the track in clear air again.

Near the cottage, Tarcan brought the handcar to a halt and handed Jane down. In a moment he had clasped her in his strong arms. "I love you, Jane," he said. "I want you to be my wife."

Her eyes were downcast. "I am promised to another," she said.

"Clayton?"

"Yes."

"And do you love him?"

"Please don't ask me that."

Back at the cottage, Clayton and Professor Potter received Jane joyfully. They were wonderstruck when Jane introduced Tarcan as the mysterious forest wanderer who had rescued her in the wilderness. Professor Potter stammered his gratitude, and Clayton offered him a cigar.

Shortly thereafter a messenger came to the door with a telegram. "Why, it's for you," said the Professor in surprise. "Dear me, how did they know you were here?"

"Pardon me," said Tarcan, and ripped the envelope open. The message read:

Fingerprints prove you Clayton heir.

D'Arnot

Tarcan glanced at his cousin, who was pouring himself a whiskey and soda at the sideboard. Clayton was handsome, well-groomed, and soft; he had never boarded a moving freight in his life, or faced the charge of an enraged coyote. With a word, Tarcan could take away his fortune, and his woman as well.

"I say," Clayton smiled, crossing the room to him. "This is all very extraordinary, you know. How did you come to be in that wilderness in the first place, if you don't mind my asking?"

Tarcan folded the telegram and put it in his pocket. "I was born there," he said deliberately. "My mother was a giant hobo; I never knew my father."

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A typical, which is to say unique, tale from Avram Davidson, concerning a man seeking "a smell disgusting beyond disgust" and a small, dark shop that sells spells and smells and severed heads, its proprietor one...

Dr. Bhumbo Singh

BY

AVRAM DAVIDSON

Trevelyan Street used to be four blocks long, but now it is only three, and its aft end is blocked by the abutment of an overpass. (Do you find the words *Dead End* to have an ominous ring?) The large building in the 300 block used to be consecrated to worship by the Mesopotamian Methodist Episcopal Church (South) but has since been deconsecrated and is presently a glue warehouse. The small building contains the only Bhuthanese grocery and deli outside of Asia; its trade is small. And the little (and wooden) building lodges an extremely dark and extemely dirty little studio which sells spells, smells, and shrunken heads. Its trades are even smaller.

The spells are expensive, the smells are exorbitant, and the prices of its shrunken heads — first chop though they be — are simply inordinate.

The studio, however, has a low rent (it has a low ceiling, too), pays no license fee — it is open (when it is open) only between the hours of seven p.m. and seven a.m., during which hours the municipal license department does not function — and lacks not for business enough to keep the proprietor, a native of the Andaman Islands, in the few, the very few things, without which he would find life insupportable: namely curried squid, which he eats — and eats and *eats* — baroque pink pearls, which he collects, and (alone, and during the left phase of the moon) wears; also live tree-shrews. Some say that they are distantly cognate to the primates and, hence, it is supposed, to Man. *Be that as it may.* In their tiny ears he whispers directions of the most unspeakable sort, and then turns them loose, with great grim confidence. And an evil laugh.

The facts whereof I speak, I speak

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with certainty, for they were related to me by my friend Mr. Underhand; and Mr. Underhand has never been known to lie.

At any rate, at least, not to *me*.

"A good moonless evening to you, Underhand Misterjee," says the proprietor, at the termination of one lowering, glowering afternoon in Midnovember, "and a bad evening indeed to those who have had the fortune to incur your exceedingly just displeasure." He scratches a filthy ear-lobe with a filthy finger.

—Midnovember, by the way, is the months which was banished from the Julian Calendar by Julian the Apostate; it has never appeared in the Gregorian Calendar: a good thing, too—

"And a good evening to *you*, Dr. Bhumbo Singh," says Mr. Underhand. "As for *them* — Ha Ha!" He folds his thin and lilac-gloved hands over the handle of his stalking-crutch. Even several so-called experts have declared the handle (observed by light far less dim than that in the shop of Bhumbo Singh) to be ivory: they are wrong: it is bone, purely bone.... Or perhaps one would better say, impurely bone....

"Ha Ha!" echoes (Dr.) Bhumbo Singh. He has in fact no right at all to this distinguished family name, which he has assumed in dishonor of a certain benevolent Sikh horse-coper who in a rash and malignly constellated hour took the notion to adopt him.

Now to business; "A spell, Underhand Sahib?" he next asks, rubbing his chin. His chin bears a dull-blue tattoo which would strike terror to the hearts and loosen the strings of the bowels of the vilest ruffians in Rangoon, Lahore, Peshawar, Pernambuco, and Wei-hatta-hatta yet unhanged, save, of course, that it is almost always by virtue of dust, the inky goo of curried squid, and a hatred of water akin to hydrophobia, totally invisible. "A spell, a spell? A nice spell? A severed head?"

"Fie upon your trumpery spells," Mr. Eevelyn (two *e*s) Underhand says easily. "They are fit only for witches, warlocks, and Boy Scouts or Girl. As for your severed heads, shrunken or otherwise: Ho Ho."

He puts the tip of his right index finger alongside of the right naris of his nose. He winks.

Dr. Bhumbo Singh attempts a leer, but his heart is not in it. "They cost uncommon high nowadays, even wholesale," he whines. And then he drops commercial mummery and simply waits.

"I have come for a smell, Doctor," Underhand says, flicking away with the tip of his stalking-crutch a cricket scaped from the supply kept to feed the tree-shrews. Dr. Bh. Singh's red little eyes gleam like those of a rogue ferret in the rutting season.

Underhand gives his head a brisk, crisp nod, and smacks his pursed lips. "A smell, subtle, slow, pervasive. A vile smell. A puzzling smell. A smell of

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seemingly ubiquitous provenaunce, and yet a smell which has no spoor. An evil smell. One which will, eventually, and to infinite relief, diminish ... diminish ... all but vanish ... and then, rising like a phoenix from its bed of fragrant ashes, stalk abroad like a pest — worse, far worse than before...

"A smell disgusting beyond disgust..."

A slight shiver passes through Dr. (he has neither right nor title to this title, but who would dare deny it him? The AMA? The last platform which they could have occupied together even in combat was also occupied by Albertus Magnus.) passes through Dr. Bhumbo S.'s filthy, maugre frame. His tongue protrudes. (It *is* true that he can, when moved to do so, touch with it the tip of his rather *retroussé* nose; if it is also true that he can — and does — catch flies with it like a toad or chameleon, Mr. Underhand has not found the matter meet communicating to *me*.) His tongue withdraws. "In short, most-valued customer, what is now requisite is a smell which will drive men mad."

"'Men,' Dr. Bhumbo Singh? *'Men?'* I said nothing of men. The word never issued from my mouth. The concept, in fact, never formed in my mind." Bhumbo shakes with what may be a malarial spasm, but is probably silent laughter.

"I have just the thing," he says. "I have the very thing. The price is purely *pro forma*, the price is minimal, the price is 1500 golden gold pieces, of the coinage of Great Golconda. Per ounce."

Underhand's brows raise, descend, meet. "'Of the imprint of Great Golconda'? Why, even the very schoolboys know that Golconda-gold was so exceedingly pure that it might be eaten like jam, which is why so few of its coins now remain. Damme, damme, Dr. Bhumbo Singh, if this is how you treat and charge your most valued customers, it is no wonder that you have so few." A mass of filth, matted together with cobwebs, slowly floats form the invisible ceiling to the unspeakable floor; is ignored.

The merchant shrugs. "Not even for my own brother, sir, am I willing to prepare the smell for less." Considering that Bhumbo's own (and only) brother, Bhimbo, has spent the last seven and one half years laden with chains in the sixth sub-basement of the gaol privily kept by that ugly, obese, and evil old woman, Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, without Bhumbo offering so much as two rupees two pice in ransom, this is quite probably the truth. "However, out of my great regard and respect for you personally and my desire to maintain the connexion, I shall not require you to purchase the full ounce. I shall sell it you by the drachm or scruple."

"Done, Bhumbojee, done!" cries Mr. Underhand. He thumps the stalking-crutch upon the filthy, filthy floor. The tree-shrew utter shrill little yipples

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of annoyance, and Bhumbo gives them crickets: they subside, aside from making nonverbal, crunching noises.

Nearby on the overpass a truck or lorry rumbles past; in its wake the frail building tembles, causing at least one of the shrunken heads to roll from side to side and grind its teeth. No one pays it mind. "Be pleased to return hither, then, Underhand Effendi, on (or, it may be, a trifle after) the Gules of December," Bhumbo Singh says. Then grows just a trifle uncertain. "'December,' the giaours call the next half-past-a-month 'December,' do they not?"

Eevelyn Underhand (two *es*) rises to go. "They do indeed. They have a high festival therein."

"They do, they do?" cries Bhumbo Singh. "I had not known. — What a thing it is to be wise!" He accompanies his customer to the dirty, dirty door with many bows, obeisances, and genuflections. Customer, having perfunctorily placed his foot once on Bhumbo's nasty neck, is long gone by the time the last of these is finished.

Gone, long gone, and the distant echo of the penny-whistle (on which he is wont to play the grace-notes to the *Lament For Nana Sahib* as he walks his spidery way through such dank ways and dark) long gone as well....

In the next sundry weeks, either Bhumbo Singh or his very simulacrum is seen in a multitude of exceedingly diverse places. Abattoirs know him for brief moments; wool-pulleries and tanneries as well. He is seen to cast handsfull of the Semi-silent Sands of the Hazramawut (or Courts of Death) at the windowpanes of Abdulahi al-Ambergrisi (who sells asafoetida as well): and the Abdulahi (an Yezid of the Yezidi-folk) to open, blench, withdraw, thrust out by means of a very long-handled net an ampula of what-it-may-be. The Bhumbo — and if it be not he, who be it? — is observed out of the corners of eyes to scramble under the wharf at the Old Fish Market (condemned, since, by the Board of Health). He visits, also, the hovels of one or two and never more than three foreign folk who formerly fared at sea in tropic clime and who live now in tumbled sheds on the farther sides of disused dumps and show their ravaged faces only to the faces of the ravaged moons.

And on the nights when the moon is dark, he scambles through ointment factories, in search of flies.

Now and then he whispers, and, did one dare come close and nigh, one would hear him calculate in somewise as this: "Such-and-such a number of golden gold-pieces! with some I shall buy me *more* baroque pink pearls and with some I shall buy me *more* curried squid and some I shall lay away to gloat upon and others — nay! one lone other! — shall I give to Iggulden the Goldbeater to beat me gold-leaf so soft and wide and thin: half of this I shall

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Lay for a strangle-mask upon the face of a certain real-estate 'developer' and tother moiety shall She-Who-Makes-Sweetmeats roll round hot comfits and pasties and pastries for me and when this has melted like yellow butter I shall eat of them nor shall I invite even one other to join me and afterwards I shall lick my twelve fingers till they be somewhat clean...."

Then he chuckles ... a sound like the bubbling of thick hot grease in the foetid try-pots of a cannibal feast.

Meanwhile, and what of Mr. Underhand?

Mr. Underhand meanwhile makes visits, too: but of a more sociable nature: Mr. Underhand pays *calls.*

"Oh. Undy. It's *you,*" says a woman through the chink in the well-chained door. "Whadda *you* want?"

"Gertrude, I have brought you, this being the first of the month, the sum mulcted of me by the terms of our bill of divorcement," says he. As always.

He passes money through the crack or slit between door-jamb and door. Rapidly she riffles through it; asks, "Is this all I'm gonna get?" As always.

"No," sighs he, "I fear me not. It is, however, all that you are going to get in this or any other one month of the year; it being the extortionate amount wrested from me by compound, I do not say 'collusion,' between your attorneys and the judge upon the bench. Gertrude: good night."

He turns and departs. She makes a sound between her palate and her sinuses which experience has instructed she intends for scorn: then: cluntch-cluntch ... thuckle-thuckle ... the night-bolts. Cloonk. The door.

Mr. Underhand, an hour later, bathes and bay-rum'd and clothed in his best-of-best. Spats upon his glittering shoes. Hat and gloves and cane in one hand. Flowers in the other.

"Eevelyn," she says, hand to her gleaming, glittering throat. "What a lovely surprise. What quite lovely flowers. Oh, how nice."

"May I come in. My dear."

"Why of course. Need you ask. Now I shan't be lonely. For a while. Eevelyn." They kiss.

A wide glance he swiftly casts round. Then asks, "Do I interrupt your dinner?"

She looks about the apartment. Her expression is one of mild surprise. "'Dinner'? Oh. That. Just a simple bowl of lobster salad on a heart of chilled iceberg lettuce. Chervil. Cress. A few spoons of caviare. Sweet butter, just a dab. A hard-cooked egg, cut fine. *Kümmelbrot.* And the smallest bottle of Brut. All far too much. But you know how Anna spoils one. You will join me."

He looks round, again. Crystal. Tapestry. Petit-point. Watteau. Chippendale. Asks: "You are not expecting—?"

"Oh, no. No. Not now. Shall we have some music. We shall have some music."

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They do.

They dance.

They dine.

They drink.

They talk.

They—

They do not.

"Heavens, the time. You must go now Eevelyn."

"Then you are expecting—?"

How her fingers glitter as she raises them to indicate what words alone cannot. "Eevelyn. I do not. Know. I never. Know. — Go, my sweetest dearest one."

He picks up hat, gloves, cane. "How is it that I never—"

She places ring-crusted fingers across his livid lips. "Hush. Oh. Hush. The noblest kindest most generous man I know will never grumble. He will be understanding. Patient. A kiss before we part."

The Andaman Islander peers a moment through gummy eye-slits. Which now widen in recognition. "Underhand Sahib!"

"And whom else did you expect? Fat Fatima, perhaps?"

The islander shakes as with an ague. "Ah, Wisdom-wallah, do not mention her even obliquely! Has she not laid my miserable and I fear by now broken brother in a deep-dark dungeon, merely for having adventitiously broken wind in her outermost courtyard? Malignant she!"

Underhand shrugs. "Well, so be it. Or: so be it *not*. — *Well*, Bhumbo Singh, I have brought certain pieces of gold, contained, according to custom, in — hem, hem,!" He coughs. "I need not name it." And looks up and around, expectantly.

At once the storekeeper begins to prowl and shuffle. "'To afflict with impotence the Viceroy of Sindh.' No. 'To impose the plague of emmerods upon the anti-Pope of—' No. 'Lord Lovat's head, with tam o'shanter,' no. no. Ah. Ah." He lifts up a tiny container, begins simultaneously to read the label (scribbled in a most debased Pracrit) and to open—

"Hold! Hold! For pity's sake do not unstopple it!"

The dark man dumbly puts down the pottikin, no larger than a thumb or (say) the smallest sized can of Spanish truffles; turns to the next item on the cluttered, webby counter. "'Will afflict with wens upon the forehead of the favorite of the Grand Bastard of Burgundy,' ah!"

Underhand is near-exasperated. "Bhumbo. Pause. Pause. Cease to dither. Lay down that spell. Down, I say, sir; down — Now. Pick up the previous item you had in hand. Yes. ...And for the sake of Kali, *give* those shrews some crickets!"

The Andaman Islander still bumples around, so Underhand, with a click of impatience, follows both his own instructions. Also gives the fellow a keen glance of reproof, advises him henceforth to use either a better or a

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worse brand of opium; and places in his hands that which holds the golds. "You have weighed the preparation, I make no doubt; count therefore the coins, in order that—"

But his supplier declines the need. "It is enough, enough, Underhand Sahib. I feel the weight to be correct. Forgive my dithering: the *ah-peen*, as you say." The voice and manner are crisp enough now. "I would offer you cups of tea, but my own brutish brews are not fine enough for your exquisite palate, and the Lipton's I cannot find."

Underhand sweeps the filthy lair with a glance. (A broom would be better.) "And fresh out of viper's milk, too, I daresay. Pit-ty." He looks once, he looks twice around the darkly place, dirty almost beyond endurance, cluttered certainly beyond description. "Ah, the immemorial wisdom of the East.... Bhumbo: a good Gules to you."

The other bows. "Do I not live but to serve you with smells, Sahib?" he enquires. And begins the requisite series of prostrations. Presently he hears the sound of the penny-whistle.

Some time after that.

Anna's nose is very red; her voice is very thick. "Always mine lady liked nice things." she says. "Diamonts, chee liked. Poils, chee liked. 'Kebbiar, I could only itt a morsel, but it moss be the bast,' chee tal to me."

"Yes, yes, yes," Underhand agrees. "How true, how true. What a blow to you. To you *and* me." He wishes that Anna would twist her handerkerchief less and apply it more.

"Always mine lady was very particular," Anna goes on. "'Anna, how you minn, you couldn't small it?' chee ask. 'Look maybe onder you choose.' I lat her see onder mine right chew: nothing. I lat her see onder mine laft chew: nothing. 'Nye, so, Mrs., how come soddenly mine kitchens not nice and clinn; come luke.' Chee come, chee luke, luke, luke. Nothing. Sneef, sneef, sneef. 'Eeyoo, God-my, waht dradful smal,' chee say. And *say* and say—"

"My, my. Yes, yes. Don't distress yourself, they take very good care of her where she is now—"

Anna (fiercely): "What? Take care mine lady gooder than me? I visit, I bring mine spatial *grumpskentorten:* Chee scrim, only. 'Mrs., Mrs., you don't rackocknize Anna? *Anna?* Mrs. Goitrude, Mors. Goitrude: is *Anna!*' But only chee scrim. And *scrim* and scrim." Anna begins to demonstrate, fists clenched, cords thrusting out from neck, voice a thin shrill grinding; Underhand begs her to desist.

Afterwards, Underhand, with some relief, returns to his own home. Man is, certainly, a social being: but there are times when, the Author of Genesis (Underhand believes), notwithstanding, when it *is* good for man to be alone. Underhand has his roses; he prunes them. Underhand has his New-

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gate Calendars; he collates them. Underhand has his first editions (Mather, de Sade, von Sacher-Masoch); he reads them. Now and then he looks up. He finds, after a while, that he is looking up rather oftener than he is looking down. Then he looks further down than usual. First he lifts up his right foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then he lifts up his left foot and turns it sideways. He puts it down. Then, room by room and closet by closet, he goes through the house, his nostrils dilating. "It is not what I think," he says, firmly. "It, is, *not* ... what I *think*."

Some time after that.

Underhand is in another place, and one which he doesn't much like. Endlessly he casts horoscopes, no pencils are allowed and so he uses crayons. The effects are certainly colorful but it is very hard to achieve fine detail. By one and by two, people pass by, and, pretending not to look, look. Underhand ignores them. Why he now, suddenly, does look up as someone stops— Look he does. This one, now, frankly gazes without pretense. Smiles.

Underhand stares. Starts. Speaks.

"Oh, my God. Oh. Oh. Bhumbo Singh. They told me he — told me *you* were dead. *Showed* me. Stuffed in between my inner and outer walls. *That* was what drove me mad. *That* was what I — *Not* what I had thought. *Not* what I had bought. Mistake. Must tell them: Bhumbo Singh: alive." He starts to rise, is stopped by a dark and gentle hand.

"Oh, no, Underhand Sahib and/or Effendi. Bhumbo *is* dead."

Underhand utters a small squeal, starts to sidle away.

"I am *Bhimbo*, own and only brother and twin to the faithless aforesaid. Who alas and regardless of the uterine ties between us let me languish in the lowermost dungeon of H.H. The Beebee Fatima, Dowager Begum of Oont, for seven years six months one week and several days, rather than pay ransom for my offense — *most* unintentional, I assure you: never eat legumes before transacting whatsoever even in the outermost courtyard of a descendant of Timur the Terrible. — The sixth sub-basement of her now-illegal gaol, whence I was released by the new and independent government, may Kali bestow blessings upon them with every pair of hands. Thence came I here. Wherefore I caused him, my natal brother Bhumbo, to be bitten to the heart by hungry tree-shrews imprisoned under an iron squid-pot which I held over his faithless heart; *how* he screamed."

He wags his head contentedly.

A moment Underhand ponders, ignoring whilst he does so the conduct of a neighbor who was now, as often, reciting what he claimed were the complete Songs of Ossian in the original Erse. From memory. Loudly. And at length. "Well, then, I understand why you put your brother to the death.

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Naturally. But why, oh, why, Bhimbo, did you stuff him in between my innermost and outermost walls? — with such dreadful results to myself? And, oh! the black whirlwind!"

A shrug. A look of gentle surprise. "Why? Well, Sahib, one had to stuff him *some*where. —I had thought to return to my native Islands, there to start an independence movement which might result, who knows and why not? in my becoming President-for-Life. But in my brother Bhumbo's uncleanly shop I lingered too long, searching for his baroque pink pearls; whilest I was thus engaged, thither came the men called Inspectors of Buildings and of Healths. 'This one's *got*ta be nuts,' one said. '*Look*it this place!" He chuckles quietly.

Underhand gapes. Then thinks. Then says, "'Escape,' yes. Bhimbo, we must put our wise heads together, cast cantrips, I cannot do it by myself alone; secure our release from—"

Bhimbo's rufous, jaundered eyes widen. "But, Sahib, I have already *been* released! To one, sir, who has spent seven and one half years, plus, in the lowermost dungeon of the fearful fat Fatima, female tyrant (since deposed), what is this place here but an hotel? Consider, Sahib: Clean clothes. Clean beds. Thrice a day, clean food — dispensed by servitors. Plus *snacks*. How fond of *snacks* I am, Sahib! And also once a week one of the gurus called *Shrink* talks with me in his sacred office; what honor. To be sure, there is no palm-toddy to be had, but a certain servitor (in return for such simple spells: Women. Gambling.) brings a savory wine called Ripple, concealed in bottles of the Dr. Pepper's medication. Betel-*pan*, there is not, but there is *toombac*, Sahib; also the talking cinema in the cabinet-boxes. *How* entertaining! *Much* murders! —And also, shower-baths! sports! thrice a week, Therapeutic Handicrafts! *Such* fun!"

He raises his voice, rather, so as to be heard not only over that of the Ossianic bard, but over that of one who, crying the words *Hello Joe!* in staccato bursts, would be good for at least a quarter of an hour. "I know what your people call this place, Sahib. But, do you know what *I* call it? Sahib, *I* call it Paradise."

Mr. Underhand feels again and sees again the approach of the black whirlwind; smells again the ineffable evil smell ... the one he had bought? The one he had not? What matter. Grasping the table for one moment's more contact with reality, he asks, "But does it in no way bother you to be forever surrounded by madmen?"

Bhimbo looks at him. The reddish-yellowish glance is patient and kind. "Ah, Sahib. Have you not learned the One Great Truth? All men are mad." The immemorial wisdom of the East is in his voice, and in his eyes.

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J. G. Ballard contributed several distinctive stories to F&SF in the 1960's, including "The Illustrated Man," which this new tale somewhat resembles. His last story here was "The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D"; among his novels since then have been CRASH (1973), HIGH RISE (1975), THE UNLIMITED DREAM COMPANY (1979) and HELLO AMERICA (1981).

Myths of the Near Future

BY

J. G. BALLARD

At dusk Sheppard was still sitting in the cockpit of the stranded aircraft, unconcerned by the evening tide that advanced towards him across the beach. Already the first waves had reached the wheel of the Cessna, kicking spurs of spray against the fuselage. Tirelessly, the dark night-water sluiced its luminous foam at the Florida shoreline, as if trying to rouse the spectral tenants of the abandoned bars and motels.

But Sheppard sat calmly at the controls, thinking of his dead wife and all the drained swimming pools of Cocoa Beach, and of the strange nightclub he had glimpsed that afternoon through the forest canopy now covering the old Space Center. Part Las Vegas casino with its flamboyant neon facade, and part Petit Trianon — a graceful classical pediment carried the chromium roof — it has suddenly materialized among the palms and tropical oaks, more unreal than any film set. As Sheppard soared past, only fifty feet above its mirrored roof, he had almost expected to see Marie Antoinette herself, in a Golden Nugget get-up, playing the milkmaid to an audience of uneasy alligators.

Before their divorce, oddly enough, Elaine had always enjoyed their weekend expeditions from Toronto to Algonquin Park, proudly roughing the wilderness in the high-chrome luxury of their Airstream trailer, as incongruous among the pine cones and silver birch as this latter-day fragment of a neon Versailles. All the same, the sight of the bizarre nightclub hidden deep in the Cape Kennedy forests, and the curious behavior of its tenants, convinced Sheppard that Elaine was still alive, and very probably held prisoner by Philip Martinsen. The chromi-

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um nightclub, presumably built thirty years earlier by some classically minded Disneyland executive, would appeal to the young neurosurgeon's sense of the absurd, a suitably garish climax to the unhappy events that had brought them together in the somber forests of the Florida peninsula.

However, Martinsen was devious enough to have picked the nightclub deliberately, part of his elaborate attempt to lure Sheppard into the open air. For weeks now he had been hanging around the deserted motels in Cocoa Beach, flying his kites and gliders, eager to talk to Sheppard but nervous of approaching the older man. From the safety of his darkened bedroom at the Starlight Motel — a huddle of dusty cabins on the coast road — Sheppard watched him through a crack in the double blinds. Every day Martinsen waited for Sheppard to appear, but was always careful to keep a drained swimming pool between them.

At first the young doctor's obsession with birds had irritated Sheppard — everything from the papier-maché condor-kites hanging like corpses above the motel to endless Picasso doves chalked on the cabin doors while Sheppard slept. Even now, as he sat on the beach in the wave-washed Cessna, he could see the snake-headed profile cut in the wet sand, part of an enormous Aztec bird across which he had landed an hour earlier.

The birds ... Elaine had referred to them in the last of her Florida letters, but those were creatures who soared inside her own head, far more exotic than anything a neurosurgeon could devise, feathered and jeweled chimeras from the paradises of Gustave Moreau. Nonetheless, Sheppard had finally taken the bait, accepting that Martinsen wanted to talk to him, and on his own terms. He forced himself from the motel, hiding behind the largest sunglasses he could find among the hundreds that littered the floor of the swimming pool, and drove to the light airfield at Titusville. For an hour he flew the rented Cessna across the forest canopy, searching the whole of Cape Kennedy for any sign of Martinsen and his kites.

Tempted to turn back, he soared to and fro above the abandoned space grounds, unsettling though they were, with their immense runways leading to no conceivable sky, and the rusting gantries like so many deaths propped up in their tattered coffins. Here at Cape Kennedy a small part of space had died. A rich emerald light glowed through the forest, as if from a huge lantern lit at the heart of the Space Center. This resonant halo, perhaps the phosphorescence of some unusual fungi on the leaves and branches, was spreading outwards and already had reached the northern streets of Cocoa Beach and crossed the Indian River to Titusville. Even the ramshackle stores and houses vibrated in the same overlit way.

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Around him the bright winds were like the open jaws of a crystal bird, the light flashing between its teeth. Sheppard clung to the safety of the jungle canopy, banking the Cessna among the huge flocks of flamingos and orioles that scattered out of his way. In Titusville a government patrol car moved down one of the few stretches of clear road, but no one else was tempted out of doors, the few inhabitants resting in their bedrooms as the forest climbed the Florida peninsula and closed around them.

Then, almost in the shadow of the Apollo 12 gantry, Sheppard had seen the nightclub. Startled by its neon facade, he stalled the Cessna. The wheels rattled the palm fronds as he throttled up a saving burst of speed and began a second circuit. The nightclub sat in a forest clearing beside a shallow inlet of the Banana River, near a crumbling camera blockhouse at the end of a concrete runway. The jungle pressed towards the nightclub on three sides, a gaudy aviary of parakeets and macaws, some long-vanished tycoon's weekend paradise.

As the birds hurtled past the Cessna's windshield, Sheppard saw two figures running towards the forest, a bald-headed woman in the grey shroud of a hospital gown followed by a familiar dark-faced man with the firm step of a warder at a private prison. Despite her age, the woman fled lightly along the ground and seemed almost to be trying to fly. Confused by the noise of the Cessna, her white hands waved a distraught semaphore at the startled macaws, as if hoping to borrow their lurid plumage to cover her bare scalp.

Trying to recognize his wife in this deranged figure, Sheppard turned away for another circuit and lost his bearings among the maze of inlets and concrete causeways that lay beneath the forest canopy. When he again picked out the nightclub, he throttled back and soared in above the trees, only to find his glide path blocked by a man-powered aircraft that had lifted into the air from the forest clearing.

Twice the size of the Cessna, this creaking cat's cradle of plastic film and piano wire wavered to left and right in front of Sheppard, doing its best to distract him. Dazzled by his propeller, Sheppard banked around the glider, and caught a last glimpse of the dark-bearded Martinsen pedaling intently inside his transparent envelope, a desperate fish hung from the sky. Then the waiting bough of a forest oak clipped the Cessna as it overran its own slipstream. The sharp antlers stripped the fabric from the starboard wing and tore off the passenger door. Stunned by the roaring air, Sheppard limped the craft back to Cocoa Beach, and brought it down to a heavy landing on the wet sand within the diagram of the immense beaked raptor which Martinsen had carved for him that morning.

* * *

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Waves washed into the open cabin of the Cessna, flicking a cold foam at Sheppard's ankles. Headlamps approached along the beach, and a government jeep raced down to the water's edge a hundred yards from the aircraft. The young woman driver stood against the windshield, shooting at Sheppard over her headlamps.

Sheppard released the harness, still reluctant to leave the Cessna. The night had come in from the sea, and now covered the shabby coastal town, but everything was still lit by that same luminescence he had glimpsed from the air, a flood of photons released from the pavilion in the forest where his wife was held prisoner. The waves that washed the propeller of the Cessna, the empty bars and motels along the beach, and the silent gantries of the Space Center were decorated with millions of miniature lights, lode-points that marked the profiles of a new realm waiting to reconstitute itself around him. Thinking of the nightclub, Sheppard stared into the firefly darkness that enveloped Cape Kennedy. Already he suspected that this was a first glimpse of a small corner of the magnetic city, a suburb of the world beyond time that lay around and within him.

Holding its image to his mind, he forced the door against the flood and jumped down into the waist-deep water as the last of the night came in on the waves. In the glare of the jeep's headlamps he felt Anne Godwin's angry hands on his shoulders, and fell headlong into the water. Skirt floating around her hips, she pulled him like a drowned pilot onto the beach and held him to the warm sand as the sea rushed into the silver gullies of the great bird whose wings embraced them.

Yet, for all the confusion of the flight, at least he had been able to go outside. Three months earlier, when Sheppard arrived at Cocoa Beach, he had broken into the first motel he could find and locked himself forever into the safety of a darkened bedroom. The journey from Toronto had been a succession of nightmare way-stations, long delays in semi-derelict bus depots and car-rental offices, queasy taxi-rides slumped in the rear seat behind two pairs of dark glasses, coat pulled over his head like a Victorian photographer nervous of his own lens. As he moved south into the steeper sunlight the landscapes of New Jersey, Virginia and the Carolinas seemed both lurid and opaque, the half-empty towns and uncrowded highways perceived on a pair of raw retinas inflamed by LSD. At times he seemed to be looking at the interior of the sun from a precarious gondola suspended at its core, through an air like fire-glass that might melt the dusty windows of his taxi.

Even Toronto, and his rapid decline after the divorce from Elaine, had not warned him of the real extent of his retreat behind his own nerve endings. Surrounded by the deserted city, it sur-

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prised Sheppard that he was one of the last to be affected, this outwardly cool architect who concealed what was in fact a powerful empathy for other people's psychological ills. A secretary's headache would send him on a restless tour of the design offices. Often he felt that he himself had invented the dying world around him.

It was now twenty years since the earliest symptoms of this strange malaise — the so-called "space sickness" — had made their appearance. At first touching only a small minority of the population, it took root like a lingering disease in the interstices of its victims' lives, in the slightest changes of habit and behavior. Invariably there was the same reluctance to go out of doors, the abandonment of job, family and friends, a dislike of daylight, a gradual loss of weight and retreat into a hibernating self. As the illness became more widespread, affecting one in a hundred of the population, blame seemed to lie with the depletion of the ozone layer that had continued apace during the 1980s and 1990s. Perhaps the symptoms of world-shyness and withdrawal were no more than a self-protective response to the hazards of ultraviolet radiation, the psychological equivalent of the sunglasses worn by the blind.

But always there was the exaggerated response to sunlight, the erratic migraines and smarting corneas that hinted at the nervous origins of the malaise. There was the taste for wayward and compulsive hobbies, like the marking of obsessional words in a novel, the construction of pointless arithmetical puzzles on a pocket calculator, the collecting of fragments of TV programs on a video recorder, and the hours spent playing back particular facial grimaces or shots of staircases.

It was another symptom of the "space sickness," appearing in its terminal stages, that gave both its popular name and the first real clue to the disease. Almost without exception, the victims became convinced that they had once been astronauts. Thousands of the sufferers lay in their darkened hospital wards, or in the seedy bedrooms of back-street hotels, unaware of the world around them but certain that they had once traveled through space to Mars and Venus, walked beside Armstrong on the Moon. All of them, in their last seconds of consciousness, became calm and serene, and murmured like drowsy passengers at the start of a new voyage, their journey home to the sun.

Sheppard could remember Elaine's final retreat, and his last visit to the white-walled clinic beside the St. Lawrence River. They had met only once in the two years since the divorce, and he had not been prepared for the transformation of this attractive and self-possessed woman dentist into a dreaming adolescent being dressed for her first dance. Elaine smiled brightly at him from her anonymous cot, a

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white hand trying to draw him onto her pillow.

"Roger, we're going soon. We're leaving together...."

As he walked away through the shadowy wards, listening to the babble of voices, the fragments of half-forgotten space jargon picked up from a hundred television serials, he had felt that the entire human race was beginning its embarkation, preparing to repatriate itself to the sun.

Sheppard recalled his last conversation with the young director of the clinic, and the weary physician's gesture of irritation, less with Sheppard than with himself and his profession.

"A *radical* approach? I assume you're thinking of something like resurrection?" Seeing the suspicious tic that jumped across Sheppard's cheek, Martinsen had taken him by the arm in a show of sympathy. "I'm sorry — she was a remarkable woman. We talked for many hours, about you, much of the time...." His small face, as intense as an undernourished child's, was broken by a bleak smile.

Before Sheppard left the clinic, the young physician showed him the photographs he had taken of Elaine sitting in a deck chair on the staff lawn earlier that summer. The first hint of radiant good humor was already on her vivid lips, as it this glamerous dentist had been quietly tasting her own laughing gas. Martinsen had clearly been most impressed by her.

But was he on the wrong track, like the whole of the medical profession? The ECT treatments and sensory deprivation, the partial lobotomies and hallucinatory drugs all seemed to miss the point. It was always best to take the mad on their own terms. What Elaine and the other victims were trying to do was explore the dimension of space, using their illness as an extreme metaphor with which to construct a space vehicle. The astronaut obsession was the key. It was curious how close the whole malaise was to the withdrawal symptoms shown by the original astronauts in the decades after the Apollo program, the retreat into mysticism and silence. Could it be that traveling into outer space, even thinking about and watching it on television, was a forced evolutionary step with unforeseen consequences, the eating of a very special kind of forbidden fruit? Perhaps, for the central nervous system, space was not a linear structure at all, but a model for an advance condition of time, a metaphor for eternity which they were wrong to try to grasp....

Looking back, Sheppard realized that for years he had been waiting for the first symptoms of the malaise to affect him, that he was all too eager to be inducted into the great voyage towards the sun. During the months before the divorce he had carefully observed the characteristic signs — the loss of weight and appetite, his cavalier neglect of both staff and clients at his

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architect's practice, his growing reluctance to go out of doors, the allergic skin rashes that sprang up if he stood for even a few seconds in the open sunlight. He tagged along on Elaine's expeditions to Algonquin Park and spent the entire weekend sealed inside the chromium womb of the Airstream, itself like an astronaut's capsule.

Was Elaine trying to provoke him? She hated his forced absent-mindedness, his endless playing with bizarre clocks and architectural follies, and above all his interest in pornography. This sinister hobby had sprung out of his peculiar obsession with the surrealists, a school of painters which his entire education and cast of mind had previously closed to him. For some reason he found himself gazing for hours at reproductions of Chirico's Turin, with its empty colonnades and reversed perspectives, its omens of departure. Then there were Magritte's dislocations of time and space, his skies tramsformed into a series of rectilinear blocks, and Dali's biomorphic anatomies.

These last had led him to his obsession with pornography. Sitting in the darkened bedroom, blinds drawn against the festering sunlight that clung to the balconies of the condominium, he gazed all day at the video recordings of Elaine at her dressing table and in the bedroom. Endlessly he played back the zooms and close-ups of her squatting on the bidet, drying herself on the edge of the bath, examining with a hopeful frown the geometry of her right breast. The magnified images of this huge hemisphere, its curvatures splayed between Sheppard's fingers, glowed against the wall and ceiling of the bedroom.

Eventually, even the tolerant Elaine had rebelled. "Roger, what are you doing to yourself — and to me? You've turned this bedroom into a porno cinema, with me as your star." She held his face, compressing twenty years of affection into her desperate hands. "For God's sake, see someone!"

But Sheppard already had. In the event, three months later, it was Elaine who had gone. At about the time that he closed his office and summarily sacked his exhausted staff, she packed her bags and stepped away into the doubtful safety of the bright sunlight.

Soon after, the space trauma recruited another passenger.

Sheppard had last seen her at Martinsen's clinic, but within only six months he received news of her remarkable recovery, no doubt one of those temporary remissions that sometimes freed the terminal cases from their hospital beds. Martinsen had abandoned his post at the clinic, ignoring the open criticism of his colleagues and allegations of misconduct. He and Elaine had left Canada and moved south to the warm Florida winter, and were now living near the old Space Center at Cape Kennedy. She was up and about, having miraculously shaken off the deep fugues.

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At first Sheppard was sceptical and guessed that the young neurosurgeon had become obsessed with Elaine and was trying some dangerous and radical treatment in a misguided attempt to save her. He imagined Martinsen abducting Elaine, lifting the drowsy but still beautiful woman from her hospital bed and carrying her out to the car, setting off for the harsh Florida light.

However, Elaine seemed well enough. During this period of apparent recovery she wrote several letters to Sheppard, describing the dark, jeweled beauty of the overgrown forest that surrounded their empty hotel, with its view over the Banana River and the rusting gantries of the abandoned Space Center. Reading her final letter in the flinty light of the Toronto spring, it seemed to Sheppard that the whole of Florida was transforming itself for Elaine into a vast replica of the cavernous grottoes of Gustave Moreau, a realm of opalized palaces and heraldic animals.

...I wish you could be here, Roger, this forest is filled with a deep marine light, almost as if the dark lagoons that once covered the Florida peninsula have come in from the past and submerged us again. There are strange creatures here that seem to have stepped off the surface of the sun. Looking out over the river this morning, I actually saw a unicorn walking on the water, its hooves shod in gold. Philip has moved my bed to the window, and I sit propped here all day, courting the birds, species I've never seen before that seem to have come from some extraordinary future. I feel sure now that I shall never leave here. Crossing the garden yesterday, I found that I was dressed in light, a sheath of golden scales that fell from my skin onto the glowing grass. The intense sunlight plays strange tricks with time and space. I'm really certain that there's a new kind of time here, flowing in some way from the old Space Center. Every leaf and flower, even the pen in my hand and these lines I'm writing to you are surrounded by haloes of themselves.

Everything moves very slowly now, it seems to take all day for a bird to cross the sky, it begins as a shabby little sparrow and transforms itself into an extravagant creature as plumed and ribboned as a lyrebird. I'm glad we came, even though Philip was attacked at the time. Coming here was my last chance, he claims, I remember him saying we should seize the light, not fear it. All the same, I think he's got more than he bargained for, he's very tired, poor boy. He's frightened of me falling asleep, he says that when I dream I try to turn into a bird. I woke up by the window this afternoon and he was holding me down, as if I were about to fly off forever into the forest.

I wish you were here, dear, it's a world the surrealists might have invented. I keep thinking that I will meet you somewhere....

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Attached to the letter was a note from Martinsen, telling him that Elaine had died the following day and that at her request she had been buried in the forest near the Space Center. The death certificate was countersigned by the Canadian consul in Miami.

A week later Sheppard closed the Toronto apartment and set off for Cape Kennedy. During the past year he had waited impatiently for the malaise to affect him, ready to make his challenge. Like everyone else, he rarely went out during the day, but through the window blinds the sight of this empty, sunlit city which came alive only at dusk drove Sheppard into all kinds of restless activity. He would go out into the noon glare and wander among the deserted office blocks, striking stylized poses in the silent curtain-walling. A few heavily cowled policemen and taxi drivers watched him like specters on a furnace floor. But Sheppard liked to play with his own obsessions. On impulse he would run around the apartment and release the blinds, turning the rooms into a series of white cubes, so many machines for creating a new kind of time and space.

Thinking of all that Elaine had said in her last letter, and determined as yet not to grieve for her, he set off eagerly on his journey south. Too excited to drive himself, and wary of the steeper sunlight, he moved by bus, rented limousine and taxi. Elaine had always been an accurate observer, and he was convinced that once he reached Florida he would soon rescue her from Martinsen and find respite for them both in the eternal quiet of the emerald forest.

In fact, he found only a shabby, derelict world of dust, drained swimming pools and silence. With the end of the Space Age thirty years earlier, the coastal towns near Cape Kennedy had been abandoned to the encroaching forest. Titusville, Cocoa Beach and the old launching grounds now constituted a psychic disaster area, a zone of ill omen. Lines of deserted bars and motels sat in the heat, their signs like rusty toys. Beside the handsome houses once owned by flight contollers and astrophysicists the empty swimming pools were a resting-place for dead insects and cracked sunglasses.

Shielded by the coat over his head, Sheppard paid off the uneasy cab driver. As he fumbled with his wallet, the unlatched suitcase burst at his feet, exposing its contents to the driver's quizzical gaze: a framed reproduction of Magritte's "The March of Summer," a portable video-cassette projector, two tins of soup, a well-thumbed set of six Kamera Klassic magazines, a clutch of cassettes labeled "Elaine/Shower Stall I-XXV," and a paperback selection of Marcey's "Chronograms."

The driver nodded pensively. "Samples? Exactly what is all that — a survival kit?"

"Of a special kind." Unaware of

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any irony in the man's voice, Sheppard explained: "They're the fusing device for a time machine. I'll make one up for you...."

"Too late. My son...." With a half-smile, the driver wound up his tinted windows and set off for Tampa in a cloud of glassy dust.

Picking the Starlight Motel at random, Sheppard let himself into an intact cabin overlooking the drained pool, the only guest apart from the elderly retriever that dozed on the office steps. He sealed the blinds and spent the next two days resting in the darkness on the musty bed, the suitcase beside him, the "survival kit" that would help him to find Elaine.

At dusk on the second day he left the bed and went to the window for his first careful look at Cocoa Beach. Through the plastic blinds he watched the shadow bisecting the empty pool, drawing a broken diagonal across the canted floor. He remembered his few words to the cab driver. The complex geometry of this three-dimensional sun dial seemed to contain the operating codes of a primitive time machine, repeated a hundred times in all the drained swimming pools of Cape Kennedy.

Surrounding the motel was the shabby coastal town, its derelict bars and stores shielded from the subtropical dusk by the flamingo-tinted parasols of the palm trees that sprang through the cracked roads and sidewalks. Beyond Cocoa Beach was the Space Center, its rusting gantries like old wounds in the sky. Staring at them through the sandy glass, Sheppard was aware for the first time of the curious delusion that he had once been an astronaut, lying on his contour couch atop the huge booster, dressed in a suit of silver foil.... An absurd idea, but the memory had come from somewhere. For all its fearfulness, the Space Center was a magnetic zone.

But where was the visionary world which Elaine had described, filled with jeweled birds? The old golden retriever sleeping under the diving board would never walk the Banana River on golden hooves.

Although he rarely left the cabin during the day — the Florida sunlight was still far too strong for him to attempt a head-on confrontation — Sheppard forced himself to put together the elements of an organized life. First, he began to take more care of his own body. His weight had been falling for years, part of a long decline that he had never tried to reverse. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, he stared at his unsavory reflection — his wasted shoulders, sallow arms and inert hands, but a fanatic's face, unshaven skin stretched across the bony points of his jaw and cheeks, orbits like the entrances to forgotten tunnels from which gleamed two penetrating lights. Everyone carried an image of himself that was ten years out of date, but Sheppard felt that he was growing older and younger at the same

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time — his past and future selves had arranged a mysterious rendezvous in this motel bedroom.

Still, he forced down the cold soup. He needed to be strong enough to drive a car, map the forests and runways of Cape Kennedy, perhaps hire a light aircraft and carry out an aerial survey of the Space Center.

At dusk, when the sky seemed to tilt and, thankfully, tipped its freight of cyclamen clouds into the Gulf of Mexico, Sheppard left the motel and foraged for food in the abandoned stores and supermarkets of Cocoa Beach. A few of the older townspeople lived on in the overgrown side streets, and one bar was still open to the infrequent visitors. Derelicts slept in the rusting cars, and the occasional tramp wandered like a schizophrenic Crusoe among the wild palms and tamarisks. Long-retired engineers from the Space Center, they hovered in their shabby whites by the deserted stores, forever hesitating to cross the shadowy streets.

As he carried a battery charger from an untended appliance store, Sheppard almost bumped into a former mission controller who had frequently appeared on television during the campaign to prevent the disbandment of NASA. With his dulled face, eyes crossed by the memories of forgotten trajectories, he resembled one of Chirico's mannequins, heads marked with mathematical formulae.

"No...." He wavered away, and grimaced at Sheppard, the wild fracture lines in his face forming the algebra of an unrealizable future. "Another time .... seventeen seconds...." He tottered off into the dusk, tapping the palm tree with one hand, preoccupied with this private countdown.

For the most part they kept to themselves, twilight guests of the abandoned motels where no rent would ever be charged and no memories ever be repaid. All of them avoided the government aid center by the bus depot. This unit, staffed by a woman psychologist from Miami University and two graduate students, distributed food parcels and medicines to the aged townspeople asleep on their rotting porches. It was also their task to round up the intinerant derelicts and persuade them to enter the state-run hospice in Tampa.

On his third evening, as he looted the local supermarket, Sheppard became aware of this alert young psychologist watching him over the dusty windshield of her jeep.

"Do you need any help breaking the law?" She came over and peered into Sheppard's carton. "I'm Anne Godwin, hello. Avocado purée, rice pudding, anchovies, you're all set for a midnight feast. But what about a filet steak, you really look as if you could use one?"

Sheppard tried to sidestep out of her way. "Nothing to worry about. I'm here on a working vacation .... a scientific project."

She eyed him shrewdly. "Just an-

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other summer visitor — though you all have Ph.D.s, the remittance men of the Space Age. Where are you staying? We'll drive you back."

As Sheppard struggled with the heavy carton she signaled to the graduate students, who strolled across the shadowy pavement. At that moment a rusty Chevrolet turned into the street, a bearded man in a soft hat at the wheel. Blocked by the jeep, he stopped to reverse the heavy sedan, and Sheppard recognized the young physician he had last seen on the steps of the clinic overlooking the St. Lawrence.

"Dr. Martinsen!" Anne Godwin released Sheppard's arm. "I've been wanting to talk to you, doctor. Wait....! That prescription you asked me to fill, I take it you've reached the menopause —"

Punching the locked gear shift, Martinsen seemed only interested in avoiding Anne Godwin and her questions. Then he saw Sheppard's gaunt eyes staring at him above the carton. He paused, then gazed back at Sheppard, with the frank and almost impatient expression of an old friend who had long since come to terms with an act of treachery. He had grown his beard, as if to hide some disease of the mouth of jaw, but his face seemed almost adolescent and at the same time aged by a strange fever.

"Doctor .... I've reported —" Anne Godwin reached Martinsen's car. He made a half-hearted attempt to hide a loosely tied bundle of brass curtain rods on the seat beside him. Was he planning to hang the forest with priceless frabics? Before Sheppard could ask, Martinsen engaged his gear lever and sped off, clipping Anne Godwin's outstretched hand with his wing mirror.

But at least he knew now that Martinsen was here, and their brief meeting allowed Sheppard to slip away unobserved from Anne Godwin. Followed by the doddery retriever, Sheppard carried his stores back to the motel, and the two of them enjoyed a tasty snack in the darkness beside the drained swimming pool.

Already he felt stronger, confident that he would soon have tracked down Martinsen and rescued Elaine. For the next week he slept during the mornings and spent the afternoons repairing the old Plymouth he had commandeered from the local garage.

As he guessed, Martinsen soon put in another appearance. A small, bird-shaped kite began a series of regular flights in the sky above Cocoa Beach. Its silver line disappeared into the forest somewhere to the north of town. Two others followed it into the air, and the trio swayed across the placid sky, flown by some enthusiast in the forest.

In the days that followed, other bird-emblems began to appear in the streets of Cocoa Beach, crude Picasso doves chalked on the boarded store fronts, on the dusty roofs of the cars, in the leafy slime on the drained floor

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of the Starlight pool, all of them presumably cryptic messages from Martinsen.

So the neurosurgeon was trying to lure him into the forest? Finally giving in to his curiosity, Sheppard drove late one afternoon to the light airfield at Titusville. Little traffic visited the shabby airstrip, and a retired commercial pilot dozed in his dusty office below a sign advertising pleasure trips around the Cape.

After a brief haggle, Sheppard rented a single-engined Cessna and took off into the softening dusk. He carried out a careful reconnaissance of the old Space Center, and at last saw the bizarre nightclub in the forest and caught a painful glimpse of the weird, bald-headed specter racing through the trees. Then Martinsen sprang his surprise with the man-powered glider, clearly intending to ambush Sheppard and force him to crash-land the Cessna into the jungle. However, Sheppard escaped, and limped back to Cocoa Beach and the incoming tide. Anne Godwin virtually dragged him from the swamped plane, but he managed to pacify her and slip away to the motel.

That evening he rested in his chair beside the drained pool, watching the video-cassettes of his wife projected onto the wall at the deep end. Somewhere in these intimate conjunctions of flesh and geometry, of memory, tenderness and desire, was the key to the vivid air, to that new time and space which the first astronauts had unwittingly revealed here at Cape Kennedy, and which he himself had glimpsed that evening from the cockpit of the drowned aircraft.

At dawn Sheppard fell asleep, only to be woken two hours later by a sudden shift of light in the darkened bedroom. A miniature eclipse of the sun was taking place. The light flickered, trembling against the window. Lying on the bed, Sheppard saw the profile of a woman's face and plumed hair projected onto the plastic blinds.

Bracing himself against the eager morning sunlight, and any unpleasant phobic rush, Sheppard eased the blinds apart. Two hundred feet away, suspended above the cabins on the far side of the swimming pool, a large man-carrying kite hung in the air. The painted figure of a winged woman was silhouetted against the sun's disc, arms outstretched across the canvas panels. Her shadow tapped the plastic blinds, only inches from Sheppard's fingers, as if asking to be let into the safety of the darkened bedroom.

Was Martinsen offering him a lift in this giant kite? Eyes shielded behind his heaviest sunglasses, Sheppard left the cabin and made his way around the drained pool. It was time now to make a modest challenge to the sun. The kite hung above him, flapping faintly, its silver wire disappearing behind a boat house half a mile along the beach.

Confident of himself, Sheppard set

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off along the beach road. During the night the Cessna had vanished, swept away by the sea. Behind the boat house the kite flyer was winding in his huge craft, and the woman's shadow kept Sheppard company, the feathered train of her hair at his feet. Already he was sure that he would find Martinsen among the derelict speedboats, raveling in whatever ambiguous message he had sent up into the fierce air.

Almost tripping over the woman's shadow, Sheppard paused to gaze around him. After so many weeks and months of avoiding the daylight, he felt uncertain of the overlit perspectives, of the sea lapping at the edges of his mind, its tongues flicking across the beach like some treacherous animal's. Ignoring it, he ran along the road. The kite flyer had vanished, slipping away into the palm-filled streets.

Sheppard threw away his sunglasses and looked into the air. He was surprised that the sky was far closer to him than he remembered. It seemed almost vertical, constructed of cubicular blocks a mile in width, the wall of an immense inverted pyramid.

The waves pressed themselves into the wet sand at his feet, flattering courtiers in this palace of light. The beach seemed to tilt, the road reversed its camber. He stopped to steady himself against the roof of an abandoned car. His retinas smarted, stung by thousands of needles. A feverish glitter rose from the roofs of the bars and motels, from the rusty neon signs and the flinty dust at his feet, as if the whole landscape was at the point of ignition.

The boat house swayed towards him, its roof tipping from side to side. Its cavernous doors opened abruptly, like the walls of an empty mountain. Sheppard stepped back, for a moment blinded by the darkness, as the figure of a winged man burst from the shadows and raced past him across the sand towards the safety of the nearby forest. Sheppard saw a bearded face under the feathered headdress, canvas wings on a wooden frame attached to the man's arms. Waving them up and down like an eccentric aviator, he sprinted between the trees, hindered more than helped by his clumsy wings, one of which sheared from his shoulder when he trapped himself among the palms. He vanished into the forest, still leaping up and down in an attempt to gain the air with his one wing.

Too surprised to laugh at Martinsen, Sheppard ran after him. He followed the line of metal thread that unraveled behind the neurosurgeon. The man-carrying kite had collapsed across the roof of the nearby drugstore, but Sheppard ignored it and ran on through the narrow streets. The line came to an end under the rear wheel of an abandoned truck, but he had already lost Martinsen.

On all sides were the bird-signs, chalked up on the fences and tree trunks, hundreds of them forming a threatening aviary, as if Martinsen was trying to intimidate the original ten-

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ants of the forest and drive them away from the Cape. Sheppard sat on the running board of the truck, holding the broken end of the kite line between his fingers.

Why was Martinsen wearing his ludicrous wings, trying to turn himself into a bird? At the end of the road he had even constructed a crude bird-trap, large enough to take a condor, or a small winged man, a cage the size of a garden shed tilted back on a trip-balance of bamboo sticks.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, Sheppard climbed onto the hood of the truck and took his bearings. He had entered an unfamiliar part of Cocoa Beach, a maze of roads invaded by the forest. He was well within that zone of vibrant light he had seen from the Cessna, the dim lantern that seemed to extend outwards from the Space Center, illuminating everything it touched. The light was deeper but more resonant, as if every leaf and flower was a window into a furnace.

Facing him, along the line of shabby bars and stores, was a curious laundromat. Sandwiched between a boarded-up appliance store and a derelict cafeteria, it resembled a miniature temple, with a roof of gilded tiles, chromium doors and windows of finely etched glass. The whole structure was suffused with a deep interior light, like some lamplit grotto in a street of shrines.

The same bizarre architecture was repeated in the nearby roads that lost themselves in the forest. A dry-goods store, a filling station and a car wash glittered in the sunlight, apparently designed for some group of visiting space enthusiasts from Bangkok or Las Vegas. Overgrown by the tamarinds and Spanish moss, the gilded turrets and metalled windows formed a jeweled suburb in the forest.

Giving up his search for Martinsen, who by now could be hiding atop one of the Apollo gantries, Sheppard decided to return to his motel. He felt exhausted, as if his body was swathed in a heavy armor. He entered the pavilion beside the cafeteria, smiling at the extravagant interior of this modest laundromat. The washing machines sat within bowers of ironwork and gilded glass, a series of side-chapels set aside for the worship of the space engineers' overalls and denims.

A ruby light glimmered around Sheppard, as if the pavilion was vibrating above a mild ground-quake. Sheppard touched the glassy wall with one hand, surprised to find that his palm seemed to merge with the surface, as if both were images being projected onto a screen. His fingers trembled, a hundred outlines superimposed upon one another. His feet drummed against the floor, sending the same rapid eddies through his legs and hips, as if he were being transformed into a holographic image, an infinity of replicas of himself. In the mirror above the cashier's metal desk, now a Byzantine throne, he glowed like an archan-

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gel. He picked up a glass paperweight from the desk, a tremulous jewel of vibrating coral that suddenly flushed within its own red sea. The ruby light that radiated from every surface within the laundromat was charged by his own bloodstream as it merged into the flicker of multiplying images.

Staring at his translucent hands, Sheppard left the pavilion and set off along the street through the intense sunlight. Beyond the tilting fences he could see the drained swimming pools of Cocoa Beach, each a complex geometry of light and shadow, canted decks encoding the secret entrances to another dimension. He had entered a city of yantras, cosmic dials sunk into the earth outside each house and motel for the benefit of devout time-travelers.

The streets were deserted, but behind him he heard a familiar labored pad. The old retriever plodded along the sidewalk, its coat shedding a tremulous golden fur. Sheppard stared at it, for a moment certain that he was seeing the unicorn Elaine had described in her last letter. He looked down at his wrists, at his incandescent fingers. The sun was annealing plates of copper light to his skin, dressing his arms and shoulders in a coronation armor. Time was condensing around him; a thousand replicas of himself from the past and future had invaded the present and clasped themselves to him.

Wings of light hung from his shoulders, feathered into a golden plumage drawn from the sun, the reborn ghosts of his once and future selves, conscripted to join him here in the streets of Coca Beach.

Startled by Sheppard, an old woman stared at him from the door of a shack beside the boat house. Brittle hands felt her blue-rinsed hair, she found herself transformed from a shabby crone into a powdered beauty from the forgotten Versailles of her youth, her thousand younger selves from every day of her life gladly recruited to her side, flushing her withered cheeks and warming her stick-like hands. Her elderly husband gazed at her from his rocker chair, recognizing her for the first time in decades, himself transformed into a conquistador half-asleep beside a magical sea.

Sheppard waved to them, and to the tramps and derelicts emerging into the sunlight from their cabins and motel rooms, drowsy angels each awaking to his own youth. The flow of light through the air had begun to slow, layers of time overlaid each other, laminas of past and future fused together. Soon the tide of photons would be still, space and time would set forever.

Eager to become part of this magnetic world, Sheppard raised his wings and turned to face the sun.

"Were you trying to fly?"

Sheppard sat against the wall beside his bed, arms held tight like crip-

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pled wings around his knees. Nearby in the darkened bedroom were the familiar pieces of furniture, the Marey and Magritte reproductions pinned to the dressing-table mirror, the projector ready to screen its black coil of film onto the wall above his head.

Yet the room seemed strange, a cabin allocated to him aboard a mysterious liner, with this concerned young psychologist sitting at the foot of the bed. He remembered her jeep in the dusty road, the loudhailer blaring at the elderly couple and the other derelicts as they were all about to rise into the air, a flight of angels. Suddenly a humdrum world had returned, his past and future selves had fled from him, he found himself standing in a street of shabby bars and shacks, a scarecrow with an old dog. Stunned, the tramps and the old couple pinched their dry cheeks and faded back to their dark bedrooms.

So this was present time. Without realizing it, he had spent all his life in this grey, teased-out zone. However, he still held the paperweight in his hand. Though inert now, raised to the light it bagan to glow again, summoning its brief past and limitless future to its own side.

Sheppard smiled at himself, remembering the translucent wings — an illusion, of course, a blur of multiple selves that shimmered from his arms and shoulders, like an immense electric plumage. But perhaps at some time in the future he became a winged man, a glass bird ready to be snared by Martinsen? He saw himself caged in the condor traps, dreaming of the sun....

Anne Godwin was shaking her head to herself. She had turned from Sheppard and was examining with evident distaste the pornographic photographs pinned to the wardrobe doors. The glossy prints were overlaid by geometric diagrams which this strange tenant of the motel had penciled across the copulating women, a secondary anatomy.

"So this is your laboratory? We've been watching you for days. Who are you, anyway?"

Sheppard looked up from his wrists, remembering the golden fluid that had cursed through the now somber veins.

"Roger Sheppard." On an impulse he added: "I'm an astronaut."

"Really?" Like a concerned nurse, she sat on the edge of the bed, tempted to touch Sheppard's forehead. "It's surprising how many of you come to Cape Kennedy — bearing in mind that the space program ended thirty years ago."

"It hasn't ended." Quietly, Sheppard did his best to correct this attractive but confused young woman. He wanted her to leave, but already he saw that she might be useful. Besides, he was keen to help her and set her free from this grey world. "In fact, there are thousands of people involved in a new program — we're at the begin-

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nings of the first true Space Age."

"Not the second? So the Apollo flights were...?"

"Misconceived." Sheppard gestured at the Marey chronograms on the dressing-table mirror, the blurred time-lapse photos so like the images he had seen of himself before Anne Godwin's arrival. "Space exploration is a branch of applied geometry, with many affinities to pornography."

"That sounds sinister." She gave a small shudder. "These photographs of yours look like the recipe for a special kind of madness. You shouldn't go out during the day. Sunlight inflames the eyes — and the mind."

Sheppard pressed his face against the cool wall, wondering how to get rid of this overconcerned young psychologist. His eyes ran along the sills of light between the plastic blinds. He no longer feared the sun and was eager to get away from this dark room. His real self belonged to the bright world outside. Sitting here, he felt like a static image in a single frame hanging from the coil of film in the projector on the bedside table. There was sense of stop-frame about the whole of his past life — his childhood and schooldays, McGill and Cambridge, the junior partnership in Vancouver, his courtship of Elaine, together seemed like so many clips run at the wrong speed. The dreams and ambitions of everyday life, the small hopes and failures, were attempts to bring these separated elements into a single whole again. Emotions were the stress lines in this overstretched web of events.

"Are you all right? Poor man, can't you breathe?"

Sheppard became aware of Anne Godwin's hand on his shoulder. He had clenched his fingers so tightly around the paperweight that his fist was white. He relaxed his grip and showed her the glassy flower.

Casually, he said: "There's some curious architecture here — filling stations and laudromats like Siamese temples. Have you seen them?"

She avoided his gaze. "Yes, to the north of Cocoa Beach. But I keep away from there." She added reluctantly: "There's a strange light by the Space Center; one doesn't know whether to believe one's eyes." She weighed the flower in her small hand, the fingers still bruised by Martinsen's wing mirror. "That's where you found this? It's like a fossil of the future."

"It is." Sheppard reached out and took it back. He needed the security of the piece, it reminded him of the luminous world from which this young woman had disturbed him. Perhaps she would join him there? He looked up at her strong forehead and high-bridged nose, a cut-prow that could cleave the time-winds, and at her broad shoulders, strong enough to bear gilded plumage. He felt a sudden urge to examine her, star her in a new video film, explore the planes of her body like a pilot touching the ailerons and fuselage of an unfamiliar aircraft.

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He stood up and stepped to the wardrobe. Without thinking, he began to compare the naked figure of his wife with the anantomy of the young woman sitting on his bed, the contours of her breasts and thighs, the triangles of her neck and pubis.

"Look, do you mind?" She stood between Sheppard and the photographs. "I'm not going to be annexed into this experiment of yours. Anyway, the police are coming to search for that aircraft. Now, what is all this?"

"I'm sorry." Sheppard caught himself. Modestly, he pointed to the elements of his "kit," the film strips, chronograms and pornographic photos, the Magritte reproduction. "It's a machine, of a kind. A time-machine. It's powered by that empty swimming pool outside. I'm trying to construct a metaphor to bring my wife back to life."

"Your wife — when did she die?"

"Three months ago. But she's here, in the forest, somewhere near the Space Center. That was her doctor you saw the other evening; he's trying to turn into a bird." Before Anne Godwin could protest again, Sheppard took her arm and beckoned her to the door of the cabin. "Come on, I'll show you how the pool works. Don't worry, you'll be outside for only ten minutes — we've all been too frightened of the sun."

She held his elbow when they reached the edge of the drained pool, her face beginning to fret in the harsh light. The floor of the pool was strewn with leaves and discarded sunglasses, in which the diagram of a bird was clearly visible.

Sheppard breathed freely in the gold-lit air. There were no kites in the sky, but to the north of Cocoa Beach he could see the man-powered aircraft circling the forest, its flimsy wings floating on the thermals. He climbed down the chromium ladder into the shallow end of the pool, then helped the nervous young woman after him.

"This is the key to it all," he explained, as she watched him intently, eyes shielded from the terrifying glare. He felt almost light-headed and gestured proudly at the angular geometry of white tile and shadow. "It's an engine, Anne, of a unique type. It's no coincidence that the Space Center is surrounded by empty swimming pools." Aware of a sudden intimacy with this youg psychologist, and certain that she would not report him to the police, he decided to take her into his confidence. As they walked down the inclined floor to the deep end he held her shoulders. Below their feet cracked the black lenses of dozens of discarded sunglasses, some of the thousands thrown into the drained pools of Cocoa Beach like coins into a Roman fountain.

"Anne, there's a door out of this pool, I'm trying to find it, a side door for all of us to escape through. This space sickness — it's really about time,

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not space, like all the Apollo flights. We think of it as a kind of madness, but it fact it may be part of a contingency plan laid down millions of years ago, a real space program, a chance to escape into a world beyond time. Thirty years ago we opened a door in the universe...."

He was sitting on the floor of the drained pool among the broken sunglasses, his back to the high wall of the deep end, talking rapidly to himself as Anne Godwin ran up the sloping floor for the medical valise in her jeep. In his white hands he held the glass paperweight, his blood and the sun charging the flower into a red blaze.

Later, as he rested with her in his bedroom at the motel, and during their days together in the coming week, Sheppard explained to her his attempt to rescue his wife, to find a key to everything going on around them.

"Anne, throw away your watch. Fling back the blinds. Think of the universe as a simultaneous structure. Everything that's ever happened, all the events that *will* ever happen, are taking place together. We can die, and yet still live, at the same time. Our sense of our own identity, the stream of things going on around us, are a kind of optical illusion. Our eyes are too close together. Those strange temples in the forest, the marvelous birds and animals — you've seen them too. We've all got to embrace the sun, I want your children to live here, and Elaine...."

"Roger —" Anne moved his hands from her left breast. For minutes, as he spoke, Sheppard had been obsessively feeling its curvatures, like a thief trying to crack a safe. She stared at the naked body of this obsessive man, the white skin alternating at the elbows and neck with areas of black sunburn, a geometry of light and shade as ambiguous as that of the drained swimming pool.

"Roger, she died three months ago. You showed me a copy of the death certificate."

"Yes, she died," Sheppard agreed. "But only in a sense. She's here, somewhere, in the total time. No one who has ever lived can ever really die. I'm going to find her, I know she's waiting here for me to bring her back to life...." He gestured modestly to the photographs around the bedroom. "It may not look much, but this is a metaphor that's going to work."

During that week, Anne Godwin did her best to help Sheppard construct his "machine." All day she submitted to the Polaroid camera, to the films of her body which Sheppard projected onto the wall above the bed, to the endless pornographic positions in which she arranged her thighs and pubis. Sheppard gazed for hours through his stop-frame focus, as if he would find among these images an anatomical door, one of the keys in a combination whose other tumblers were the Marey chronograms, the sur-

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realist paintings and the drained swimming pool in the ever-brighter sunlight outside. In the evenings Sheppard would take her out into the dusk and pose her beside the empty pool, naked above the waist, a dream-woman in a Delvaux landscape.

Meanwhile, Sheppard's duel with Martinsen continued in the skies over Cape Kennedy. After a storm, the drowned Cessna was washed up onto the beach, sections of the wing and tailplane, parts of the cabin and undercarriage. The reappearance of the aircraft drove both men into a frenzy of activity. The bird motifs multiplied around the streets of Cocoa Beach, aerosolled onto the flaking storefronts. The outlines of giant birds covered the beach, their talons gripping the fragments of the Cessna.

And all the while, the light continued to grow brighter, radiating outwards from the gantries of the Space Center, inflaming the trees and flowers and paving the dusty sidewalks with a carpet of diamonds. For Anne, this sinister halo that lay over Cocoa Beach seemed to sear itself into her retinas. Nervous of windows, she submitted herself to Sheppard during these last days. It was only when he tried to suffocate her, in a confused attempt to release her past and future selves from their prison, that she escaped from the motel and set off for the sheriff at Titusville.

As the siren of the police car faded through the forest, Sheppard rested against the steering wheel of the Plymouth. He had reached the old NASA causeway across the Banana River, barely in time to turn off onto a disused slip road. He unclenched his fists, uneasily aware that his hands still stung from his struggle with Anne Godwin. If only he had been given more time to warn the young woman that he was trying to help her, to free her from that transient, time-locked flesh he had caressed so affectionately.

Restarting the engine, Sheppard drove along the slip road, already an uneven jungle path. Here on Merrit Island, almost within the sweeping shadows of the great gantries, the forest seemed ablaze with light, a submarine world in which each leaf and branch hung weightlessly around him. Relics of the first Space Age emerged from the undergrowth like overlit ghosts — a spherical fuel tank stitched into a jacket of flowering lianas, rocket launchers collapsed at the feet of derelict gantries, an immense tracked vehicle six stories high like an iron hotel, whose unwound treads formed two notched metal roads through the forest.

Six hundred yards ahead, when the path petered out below a collapsed palisade of palm trunks, Sheppard switched off the engine and stepped from the car. Now that he was well within the perimeter of the Space Center, he found that the process of time-fusion was even more advanced. The

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rotting palms lay beside him, but alive again, the rich scrolls of their bark bright with the jade years of youth, glowing with the copper hues of their forest maturity, elegant in the grey marquetry of their declining age.

Through a break in the canopy Sheppard saw the Apollo 12 gantry rising through the high oaks like the blade of a giant sundial. Its shadow lay across a silver inlet of the Banana River. Remembering his flight in the Cessna, Sheppard estimated that the nightclub was little more than a mile to the northwest. He set off on foot through the forest, stepping from one log to the next, avoiding the curtains of Spanish moss that hung out their beguiling frescoes. He crossed a small glade beside a shallow stream, where a large alligator basked contentedly in a glow of self-generated light, smiling to itself as its golden jaws nuzzled its past and future selves. Vivid ferns sprang from the damp humus, ornate leaves stamped from foil, layer upon layer of copper and verdigris annealed together. Even the modest ground-ivy seemed to have glutted itself on the corpses of long-vanished astronauts. This was a world nourished by time.

Bird-signs marked the trees, Picasso doves scrawled on every trunk as if some overworked removal manager was preparing the entire forest for flight. There were huge traps, set out in the narrow clearings and clearly designed to snare a prey other than birds. Standing by one of the trip-balanced hutches, Sheppard noticed that they all pointed toward the Apollo gantries. So Martinsen was now frightened, not of Sheppard, but of some aerial creature about to emerge from the heart of the Space Center.

Sheppard tossed a loose branch onto the sensitive balance of the trap. There was a flicker of sprung bamboo, and the heavy hutch fell to the ground in a cloud of leaves, sending a glimmer of light reverberating among the trees. Almost at once there was a flurry of activity from a copse of glowing palmettos a hundred yards away. As Sheppard waited, hidden behind the trap, a running figure approached, a breaded man in a ragged bird costume, half-Crusoe, half-Indian brave, bright macaw feathers tied to his wrists and an aviator's goggles on his forehead.

He raced up to the trap and stared at it in a distraught way. Relieved to find it empty, he brushed the tattered feathers from his eyes and peered at the canopy overhead, as if expecting to see his quarry perched on a nearby branch.

"Elaine...!"

Martinsen's cry was a pathetic moan. Unsure how to calm the neurosurgeon, Sheppard stood up.

"Elaine isn't here, doctor —"

Martinsen flinched, his bearded face as small as a child's. He stared at Sheppard, barely managing to control himself. His eyes roved across the glowing ground and foliage, and he flicked nervously at the blurred edges

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of his fingers, clearly terrified of these ghosts of his other selves now clinging to him. He gestured warningly to Sheppard, pointing to the multiple outlines of his arms and legs that formed a glowing armor.

"Sheppard, keep moving. I heard a noise — have you seen Elaine?"

"She's dead, doctor."

"Even the dead can dream!" Martinsen nodded to Sheppard, his body shaking as if with fever. He pointed to the bird-traps. "She dreams of flying. I've put these here, to catch her if she tries to escape."

"Doctor..." Sheppard approached the exhausted physician. "Let her fly, let her dream. And let her *wake*...."

"Sheppard!" Martinsen stepped back, appalled by Sheppard's electric hand raised towards him. "She's trying to come back from the dead!"

Before Sheppard could reach him, the neurosurgeon turned away. He smoothed his feathers and darted through the palms, with a hoot of pain and anger disappeared into the forest.

Sheppard let him go. He knew now why Martinsen had flown his kites, and filled the forest with the images of birds. He had been preparing the whole of the Space Center for Elaine, transforming the jungle into an aviary where she might be at home. Terrified by the sight of this apparently winged woman waking from her deathbed, he hoped that somehow he could keep her within the magical realm of the Cape Kennedy forest.

Leaving the traps, Sheppard set off through the trees, his eyes fixed on the great gantries now only a few hundred yards away. He could feel the time-winds playing on his skin, annealing his other selves onto his arms and shoulders, the transformation of himself once again into that angelic being who strode through the shabby streets of Cocoa Beach. He crossed a concrete runway and entered an area of deeper forest, an emerald world furnished with extravagant frescoes, a palace without walls.

He had almost ceased to breathe. Here, at the center of the space grounds, he could feel time rapidly engorging itself. The infinitive pasts and future of the forest had fused together. A long-tailed parakeet paused among the branches over his head, an electric emblem of itself more magnificent than a peacock. A jeweled snake hung from a bough, gathering to ot all the embroidered skins it had once shed.

An inlet of the Banana River slid through the trees, a silver tongue lying passively at his feet. On the bank fifty yards away was the nightclub he had seen from the Cessna, its luminous facade glowing against the foliage.

Sheppard hesitated by the water's edge and then stepped onto its hard surface. He felt the brittle corrugations under his feet, as if he were walking across a floor of frosted glass. Without time, nothing could disturb the water. On the quartz-like grass below the nightclub a flock of orioles had begun

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to rise from the ground. They hung silently in the air, their golden fans lit by the sun.

Sheppard stepped ashore and walked up the slope towards them. A giant butterfly spread its harlequin wings against the air, halted in midflight. Avoiding it, Sheppard strode towards the entrance to the nightclub, where the man-powered glider sat on the grass, its propeller a bright sword. An unfamiliar bird crouched on the canopy, a rare species of quetzal or toucan, only recently a modest starling. It stared at its prey, a small lizard sitting on the steps, now a confident iguana armored within all its selves. Like everything in the forest, both had become ornamental creatures drained of malice.

Through the crystal doors Sheppard peered into the glowing bower of the nightclub. Already he could see that this exotic pavilion had once been no more than a park-keeper's lodge, some bird-watcher's weekend hide transformed by the light of its gathering identities into this miniature casino. The magic casements revealed a small but opulent chamber, a circle of well-upholstered electric chairs beside a kitchen like the side-chapel of a chromium cathedral. Along the rear wall was a set of disused cages left here years earlier by a local ornithologist.

Sheppard unlatched the doors and stepped into the airless interior. A musty and unpleasant odor hung around him, not the spoor of birds but of some unclaimed carcass stored too long in the sun.

Behind the kitchen, and partly hidden in the shadows thrown by the heavy curtains, was a large cage of polished brass rods. It stood on a platform, with a velvet drape across one end, as if some distracted conjurer had been about to perform an elaborate trick involving his assistant and a flock of doves.

Sheppard crossed the chamber, careful not to touch the glowing chairs. The cage enclosed a narrow hospital cot, its side panels raised and tightly bolted. Lying on its bare mattress was an elderly woman in a bathrobe. She stared with weak eyes at the bars above her face, hair hidden inside a white towel wrapped securely around her forehead. One arthritic hand had seized the pillow, so that her chin jutted forward like a chisel. Her mouth was open in a dead gape, an ugly rictus that exposed her surprisingly even teeth.

Looking down at the waxy skin of this once familiar face, a part of his life for so many years, Sheppard at first thought that he was looking at the corpse of his mother. But as he pulled back the velvet drape, the sunlight touched the porcelain caps of her teeth.

"Elaine...."

Already he accepted that she was dead, that he had come too late to this makeshift mausoleum where the grieving Martinsen had kept her body, lock-

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ing it into this cage while he tried to draw Sheppard into the forest.

He reached through the bars and touched her forehead. His nervous hand dislodged the towel, exposing her bald scalp. But before he could replace the grey skull-cloth, he felt something seize his wrist. Her right hand, a clutch of knobbly sticks from which all feeling had long expired, moved and took his own. Her weak eyes stared calmly at Sheppard, recognizing this young husband without any surprise. Her blanched lips moved across her teeth, testing the polished cusps, as if she were cautiously identifying herself.

"Elaine ... I've come. I'll take you —" Trying to warm her hand, Sheppard felt an enormous sense of relief, knowing the all the pain and uncertainty of the past months, his search for the secret door, had been worthwhile. He felt a race of affection for his wife, a need to give way to all the stored emotions he had been unable to express since her death. There were a thousand and one things to tell her, about his plans for the future, his uneven health and, above all, his long quest for her across the drained swimming pools of Cape Kennedy.

He could see the glider outside, the strange bird that guarded the now-glowing cockpit, a halo in which they could fly away together. He fumbled with the door to the cage, confused by the almost funereal glimmer that had begun to emanate from Elaine's body. But as she stirred and touched her face, a warm light suffused her grey skin. Her face was softening, the bony points of her forehead retreated into the smooth temples, her mouth lost its death-grimace and became the bright bow of the young student he had first seen twenty years ago, smiling at him across the tennis club pool. She was a child again, her parched body flushed and irrigated by her previous selves, a lively schoolgirl animated by the images of her past and future.

She sat up, strong fingers releasing the death-cap around her head, and shook loose the damp tresses of silver hair. She reached her hands towards Sheppard, trying to embrace her husband through the bars. Already her arms and shoulders were sheathed in light, that electric plumage which he now wore himself, winged lover of this winged woman.

As he unlocked the cage, Sheppard saw the pavilion doors open to the sun. Martinsen stood in the entrance, staring at the bright air with the toneless expression of a sleepwalker woken from a dark dream. He had shed his feathers, and his body was now dressed in a dozen glimmering images of himself, refractions of past and present seen through the prism of time.

He gestured to Sheppard, trying to warn him away from his wife. Sheppard was certain now that the physician had been given a glimpse into the dream-time, as he mourned Elaine in the hours after her death. He had seen her come alive from the dead, as the

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images of her past and youth came to her rescue, drawn here by the unseen powers of the Space Center. He feared the open cage, and the specter of this winged woman rising from her dreams at the grave's edge, summoning the legion of her past selves to resurrect her.

Confident that Martinsen would soon understand, Sheppard embraced his wife and lifted her from the bed, eager to let this young woman escape into the sunlight.

Could all this have been waiting for them, around the unseen corners of their past lives? Sheppard stood by the pavilion, looking out at the silent world. An almost tangible amber sea lay over the sandbars of Cape Kennedy and Merrit Island. Hung from the Apollo gantries, a canopy of diamond air stretched across the forest.

There was a glimmer of movement from the river below. A young woman ran along the surface of the water, her silver hair flowing behind her like half-furled wings. Elaine was learning to fly. The light from her outstretched arms glowed on the water and dappled the leaves of the passing trees. She waved to Sheppard, beckoning him to join her, a child who was both his mother and his daughter.

Sheppard walked towards the water. He moved through the flock of orioles suspended above the grass. Each of the stationary birds had become a congested jewel dazzled by its own reflection. He took one of the birds from the air and smoothed its plumage, searching for that same key he had tried to find when he caressed Anne Godwin. He felt the fluttering aviary in his hands, a feathered universe that trembled around a single heart.

The bird shuddered and came to life, like a flower released from its capsule. It sprang from his fingers, a rush of images of itself between the branches. Glad to set it free, Sheppard lifted the orioles down from the air and caressed them one by one. He released the giant butterfly, the quetzal and the iguana, the moths and insects, the frozen, time-locked ferns and palmettos by the water's edge.

Last of all, he released Martinsen. He embraced the helpless doctor, searching for the strong sinews of the young student and the wise bones of the elderly physician. In a sudden moment of recognition, Martinsen saw himself, his youth and his age merged in the open geometries of his face, this happy rendezvous of his past and future selves. He stepped back from Sheppard, hands raised in a generous salute, then ran across the grass towards the river, eager to see Elaine.

Content now, Sheppard set off to join them. Soon the forest would be alive again, and they could return to Cocoa Beach, to that motel where Anne Godwin lay in the darkened bedroom. From there they could move on,

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to the towns and cities of the south, to the sleepwalking children in the parks, to the dreaming mothers and fathers embalmed in their homes, waiting to be woken from the present into the infinite realm of their time-filled selves.

"But I told you I'd show you an amoeba magnified 42,000 times."

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Ed Bryant's new story concerns a contemporary witch and an old woman who has lost her land and who has developed the disconcerting ability to ... disappear. His last story here, "The Thermals of August," (May 1981) was a nominee for both Hugo and Nebula awards.

In the Shade

BY

EDWARD BRYANT

Keeping a tail on the taxi ahead of me was the easy part. Staying discreet about it wasn't. The white cab and my Audi were the only two vehicles on the graveled road, and the twin rooster tails of dust rose at least ten yards into the cloudless sky. I did my best, lagging back about half a mile. Only a blind driver could have failed to spot me. However, I'm not exactly Nancy Drew, and the taxi driver didn't ferry a desperate criminal. The woman he carried away from the town and into the summer morning was a seventy-one-year-old grandmother whose daughter was terrified that Gram O'Brien might be hurting herself.

Alice Mary O'Brien had not been young when I first met her while I was a little girl. Even then, everyone called her Gram, including Marge, her last-born. Marge had been my best friend in eighth grade, and we had intermittently kept in touch, though the miles and decades had inexorably drawn us apart.

I thought of Gram as a marvelously tough and plain-spoken pioneer woman whose parents had moved from Wisconsin to Wyoming in a team-drawn wagon shortly before the First World War. By that time there were no Indian raids or anything else quite as melodramatic, but life was still frontier-precarious with drought, blizzards, timber wolves and the influenza epidemic of 1919. Most of Gram's brothers and sisters had not survived infancy.

Over decades, the O'Briens hewed out an increasingly fruitful life on their ranch along the fertile bottomlands of the Trapper River. Part of the measure was that more children, and then grandchildren, survived. Some of the offspring moved away to less sage-

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choked pastures. Others stayed with the original land. Gram married the neighbor boy at the height of the Great Depression. When Gram's father died just after Pearl Harbor, her husband and she moved into the big old house on the river. And when her husband died shortly after the election of John F. Kennedy, Gram took back the O'Brien name. She was proud of it.

Gram O'Brien lived happily as the family matriarch for another twenty years. Then came the troubled time when the power company fixed on Stubblefield as the site of a 1,500-megawatt coal-fired generating plant. The boilers and the cooling system needed considerable water, and that was where the Trapper River came in. Graystone Dam entered construction; the waters of the reservoir began to back up.

She fought it down to the wire in the courts, but the companies with their giant machinery and high-powered law firms won. The crews came in with bulldozers and chain saws and felled the thick old cottonwoods along the river. At the end, Gram would not move, no matter what the entreaties of Marge or her other children, or the grandchildren. On the final morning, the sheriff's deputies used fire axes to batter down Gram's door. Then, because they both feared and respected her, and because everyone knew her, they let Gram watch from the sheriff's car, at her own request, as the dozers moved in and the walls of the O'Brien house collapsed inward.

The new world of the changing West had defeated Gram. The question in a lot of minds was whether the defeat was permanent.

Gram signed herself into Riverview Manor, the new, clean, well-managed senior citizens' development in town. She had her own room in bright, decorator colors. O'Brien money would ensure that she was cared for. She could grow older gracefully, and finally die.

In the meantime, Gram lived on as the O'Brien land drowned beneath the spreading surface of Graystone Reservoir. As the first unit of the power plant went on-line and the six-hundred-foot stack belched steam, the slow flood overcame the original banks of the Trapper River.

I had seen the dry boneyards of stacked branches when I drove up the Interstate from Denver, but at first hadn't realized where the trees had come from. All I knew was that someone would have a lot of winter firewood. I'd made no direct connection as I looked north across town and watched the steady blinking of the aircraft-warning strobes on the three stacks.

Once in Stubblefield, I settled myself in a stark room at the Trapper Peak Motel and phoned Marge. She sounded glad to hear from me, for all the strain evident in her voice.

"Angie, can you come over right away? Not if you're too tired, but —"

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"I'm walking out the door," I said. "Just give me directions."

Marge's trailer was parked in one of the mobile-home warrens that now claimed to be a suburb of the town. The development sprawled across what had been wheatfields and horse pastures when I'd lived in Stubblefield years before. In the twilight, the trailers gleamed like an underwater colony of mollusks. I found Marge's number and parked behind an old red Ford four-by-four. Out of my car, I edged past a beautiful husky on a frayed rope. The dog didn't give me a second look.

Marge answered the door as though she had been waiting on the knock. I thought she was approaching her forties well. Never the slimmest girl in junior high, she was getting a little hefty around the hips. But Marge's face was arresting. She'd told me once there was American Indian blood back a few generations. Time had tautened the skin over her cheeks, delineating a bone structure I envied.

We hestitated, time making us awkward. Then she hugged me. "Angie, it's so good to see you." She smelled fresh, smelled of pine and sun-dried laundry. "Thanks for coming."

Marge introduced me to her two Manx cats. The husky outside was Roger. Marge's sixteen-year-old daughter was on an overnight hike at the church camp on Trapper Peak.

She started talking a nervous streak, settling me on the living room couch and filling two schooner glasses with beer. At first I waited patiently for the nervous flood to abate.

"How's Gram?" I finally said.

"Gram?" Marge looked away from my eyes and toyed with the stem of her glass.

"Your mother. Remember?" I smiled.

"I'm worried sick."

"I figured that," I said. "You didn't sound terrific on the phone. You also didn't tell me anything."

Marge's cheeks went red. "I thought you'd think I was silly to worry at all."

"About *what*?" I said in exasperation. "Level with me."

"I think you can help me. I've heard you can help."

I looked at her quizzically.

"People always talked, Angie."

"Don't be coy," I said. "Come on. You were always a straight-arrow."

She met my gaze again. "You're a witch," she said.

"Of course I am. And now that you're divorced, you manage a hardware store, right?"

Marge nodded. She began to smile too. "Grommets and spells don't seem like the same ballpark."

'I can't fix a dripping faucet with magic," I said. "Now, what about Gram?"

Marge leaned back into the cushions, obviously starting to relax. Still, I thought I saw a spark of the modern rationalist burning back some-

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where behind her eyes. On some level, Marge didn't believe my powers went any further than my MasterCard. On another level, she believed in and feared the powers. But she had sought me out.

"My mother's in the old people's home, you know that, right?" I nodded. "She keeps ... disappearing," Marge said. "It's honest-to-god vanishing, and it happens almost every day."

"Maybe she just walks out the door."

"Nobody sees her go," said Marge.

"But she comes back?"

"So far."

"And safe?"

"Yes. So far."

"What's the problem?" I said.

"Gram's an old woman," Marge said. "She could get hurt on her own. God knows where she goes. Nobody else does."

"So you want me to trace your mother's playing hooky?"

"Wherever she goes," said Marge. "Yes."

"Sure you don't need a professional detective?"

"Hired one up from Cheyenne. Not too bright, but he should have been good enough. Didn't tell me anything."

"So why me?"

Marge said desperately, "I feel like I need you."

And that was why I was driving down the graveled road to Graystone Dam and Reservoir, keeping a moderate distance behind the taxi which carried Gram O'Brien.

As for Gram's disappearing from Riverview Manor, well, I played a hunch. I had left Marge's early, so I could make business hours in town. I stopped at the rock shop and bought a small chunk of iron ore from the Sunrise Mine. My toolbox furnished a file so I could supplement the ore with filings from a rusted cast-iron stove from the junkpile behind the motel. The nearest liquor store didn't have wine imported from much farther away than Boise, but that was all right. Back in my room, I used an immersion heater to boil the ore and filings in milk. Then I decanted the liquid into a plastic glass of wine. I debated for a moment, then put the mixture away until the morning. Luckily there was a second empty cup. I drank the rest of the wine and watched a Clint Eastwood movie on TV before dropping into an untroubled slumber.

In the morning, I had no appetite, but forced myself to go out to a cafe for a short stack and a glass of milk. Potions don't sit well on an empty stomach. Then I returned to the room and downed the concoction I'd fixed the night before. Up to a certain degree of fascination — of enchantment — I should have clear sight. I brushed my teeth twice.

At eight o'clock, I parked my Audi in a corner of the asphalt parking lot that commanded a view of the Manor from two sides. Shortly before ten, I saw a familiar figure stroll out of the

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rear firedoor. Hair gray as slate and rolled up beneath a scarf, Gram looked little different from my memories of her from the 'sixties. Stouter, maybe, but her posture was still as ramrod-rigid.

Gram walked right past an aide taking out some trash. The aide looked through her, oblivious to the woman's presence.

She stepped quickly down the walk to the street and turned west. I waited thirty seconds, then started the Audi and followed her. Gram walked until she came to the telephone booth beside the Texaco station. She made a call; ten minutes later, one of the town's two taxis pulled up. I recognized Petey Winston looking gray and emaciated, the same as he had when he drove school buses while I was growing up. The taxi pulled away and I followed.

The road to the dam led past the three blocky generating units of the power station. Closer to the reservoir, it was lined with candy-striped metal poles, each with an attached plate that read TRAPPER RIVER STATION WATER SUPPLY HORIZONTAL CURVE, or WATER SUPPLY AIR VACUUM VALVE, or WATER SUPPLY BLOWOFF, or any of a dozen other esoteric designations. I took time to notice those things, hanging back, pretending to have no interest in the vehicle ahead. Besides, I'm always curious about other people's arcana.

I crossed a rise and saw the reservoir lying to my left. The water held the startling deep blue of the sky before a storm. Stratified layers of sandstone lay in streaks of tan and beige upslope from the waterline. The earthen dam sprawled new, the blade-cuts in the soil raw, the cubical concrete pumping station stark and unfinished. Someday the drowned valley would be a community recreation area. A rough reef of brown fill segregated a long, narrow slash of water that would become a small marina.

We passed a flagwoman in her red safety vest, sitting reading *The Dead Zone* beside a chocolate-colored van. She glanced up and pointed to her CAUTION sign. I slowed down. No one in the taxi ahead seemed to have noticed the admonition.

Another quarter mile, and the road coiled closer to the water, passing a compound enclosed in hurricane fence. An unlikely row of potted palm trees lined the south side of one of the construction trailers. Doubtful in this climate — I knew that. But almost anything might happen in this hushed valley. I couldn't identify any of them directly, but my intuitions were beginning to push buttons.

Eventually the road would be paved, completed, and would lead across the top of the dam. Not yet. The road ended at the foot of the newly dozed hill rising against the east.

I saw brake lights flicker through the dust. I slalomed between the red and yellow rag flags tacked to lath, pulled off the road, and parked. Then I

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got out of the Audi and stood beside the hood. A few hundred yards closer to the dam, the taxi slewed around in its dirty cloud and roared back toward me. As he passed my car, Petey Winston smiled and waved. Momentarily at a loss, I waved back.

The dust began to settle and I saw Gram O'Brien. She walked briskly down the gentle slope toward the water. The sun dazzle gleamed like burnished armor.

Gram O'Brien waded into the water.

Was it safe? asked an inner voice. Of course not. Were the deadfalls all snagged out and safely hauled away? I had seen the wooden mausoleum along the Interstate.

The reservoir was up to her shoulders. To her neck.

Swimming? I thought. Fully clothed? What was she *doing*? She always comes back. So far, Marge had said.

The water closed silently over Gram's head. The ripples of her passage were gone.

I ran toward the beach, hopping on one foot as I wrestled with a knotted shoelace, then hopping on the other as I stepped on something sharp and shearing. Jeans and sweater off. I dropped my watch. Into the reservoir. The floor dropped off rapidly and I was swimming. I tried to guess where I had last seen the top of Gram's head, and dived.

The water slapped me like a wet towel someone had stored in the freezer. The darkness was instant and complete. The voice in my mind kept asking what happened to that bright, sunny morning above me. I couldn't see a damn thing, just kept stroking down.

And then—

It was years ago. I remember driving across central Illinois in the early summer when almost anything I could see through the windshield was lush in shades of green. Then I looked at the sky. Reversed-field images — tricks to play on the eye: first you see something like a dark candelabrum surrounded by white space ... look again, and you see two faces in profile separated by darkness.

I stared at the sky and no longer sat in my roommate's blue Pontiac thrumming down the two-lane blacktop. The clouds borrowed the swept texture of beach; the open sky claimed the deep blue of ocean. The plane I now piloted banked high above the crescent meeting of sea and land. Reality had reversed. For much longer than a moment, I didn't know which reality I should believe.

—I lost my orientation in the cold and black. I didn't know whether I still angled down, or if my increasingly clumsy strokes hauled me toward the surface.

Pain ached in my lungs. Suddenly, hysterically, I blessed stopping smoking for giving back some of my breath. The pressure in the top of my chest demanded I spit out all the air I held in one long silver bubble.

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Light. I saw it gleam above me — or below me. I still didn't know the referent. But I swam toward the light, a radiance that throbbed like a beacon. It warmed me. It wasn't the sun shining through the surface. It was more like —

Summer.

—as I burst through a subtle barrier of heat and brightness and whispering touches like wind on my skin. The sudden flower of pain blossomed in my chest and my lungs let go their oxygen-starved load. I gulped in — air. Not water. Air. I fell to my knees on a grassy slope and took in great heaving gasps of air.

When my heart finally slowed to something close to normal, I saw that I was kneeling on the bank of the Trapper River — not the great bloated worm of the reservoir, but the river as it had once been, the river I remembered from the hikes and picnics and raft trips. Shakily, I stood and looked around.

The sunny morning I had left was still here. I turned from the river bank and tried to get an orientation. I couldn't see my car. More dramatically, the dam was gone. So were the pumping station, construction buildings, palm trees, and all the rest.

I turned parallel to the river and started to walk downstream toward the O'Brien house. The house sat about a hundred yards ahead of me. The frame construction with the three upstairs dormers, the picket fence and gate hanging open because the latch was broken, the immaculate white siding, all were as familiar as the lines in an old friend's face.

I hesitated. There *was* no O'Brien house. The bulldozers had splintered it to kindling. I thought I saw the house ahead of me waver. My eyes watered suddenly and I shook my head. I felt a small blade of pain twist in my chest. The image of the house solidified as I concentrated. The pain receded and I walked closer.

Again I hesitated. I was padding through the grass on bare feet. I was dressed only in panties and teeshirt. My clothing wasn't wet.

Again I slowly turned in a complete circle. No power plant loomed in the west. Only clouds climbed above Trapper Peak — no steam plume. Something else lacked. I realized I could hear no traffic hum from I-25, no snarling downshifts of trucks slowing for a coffee stop in town. I heard wind sighing off the eastern plain as it dipped toward the mountains. That was all.

I continued toward the white house. At the gate I stopped because of the throbbing ache in my foot. I balanced on one leg in a clumsy, hopping little dance and checked. The deep cut in the sole of my left foot oozed blood. I remembered I had sliced it when I was trying to get to the beach. Getting to the beach to pursue Gram O'Brien. Seeing her disappear into the reservoir with the cold water lapping over her

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head. Following. Diving. Finding myself —

"I do declare," said a voice from years out of my past. I let my leg straighten and looked up. Gram O'Brien, framed by the porch swing and the open screen door, stood on the porch. She smiled and motioned me to approach. "Angela?"

I smiled back at her and nodded.

"Angela, you're all grown up. You hurt your foot, dear? Come on up here and I'll take a look at it. A little tincture of merthiolate and a bandage, and you'll be right as rain. Then we'll sit in the living room and visit and I'll fix you some iced tea. There's a batch of oatmeal cookies just coming out of the oven, too."

I heard the clink of ice cubes from my childhood. The smell of fresh-baked cookies seduced my nose. I started toward her. "Gram, good morning." The smiling, robust woman radiated vigor and warmth. She was just as I remembered her.

And then, once through the gate, I crossed into the shadow of the cottonwoods. The largest of the trees had grown for more than a century along the bank of the Trapper. Gram's father had planted pine to complete the windbreak. The trees also worked as a natural air-conditioner in the summer.

Their shadows chilled me.

I stopped and looked up at the broad, strong limbs made for climbing and just right for nailing up tree houses. I *knew* those trees were dead. I had seen the boneyards of chain-sawed branches lining the Interstate for a mile. Dynamite and caterpillar tractors had uprooted these giants from their home. Flatbeds and work crews had transported them to a mass grave.

"Child, you come up here!"

I heard the urgency in her voice, but couldn't concentrate on making that first step to the porch. Gram's face shivered, just as the house had wavered before. I tried to climb. My foot went right through the tread as though it weren't there.

"Angela!"

I opened my mouth to speak, to tell Gram something was wrong, but water flooded in. I coughed, choked, sucked water down my throat and into my lungs. The chill, dull ache spread all through me.

Panic came when I knew I couldn't breathe. I flailed my arms, could do nothing else, no control, could see nothing more than lights bursting in retinal darkness.

I strained to breathe, ached to scream, and then the numbing weight across my chest froze all that. There was nothing else. The lights no longer burst.

I awoke slowly with stitches of agony drumming along both sides of my ribcage. It really did hurt to breathe. But at least I was breathing.

It occurred to me finally to open my eyes. Then it occurred to me to try

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to focus. I saw fluorescent lights first. It was the waking-up-in-the-hospital cliché. I focused on the pointillist patterns surrounding the lights and, after what seemed a long time, felt the revelation that I must be staring at holes in the acoustical tile.

"Angie? You're awake now, aren't you?"

The holes in the ceiling truly fascinated me.

"Angie, are you alive?"

I forced myself to turn my head on the hard pillow and looked past a spray of purple flowers. Marge's expression seemed worried. Tears glossed her dark eyes. She tried to smile as she reached out to touch my hair. "Damn it, Angie, say something."

"Uh," I said, "where am I?"

"County Memorial," said Marge. She managed the smile at last. "You're drying out."

"When—"

Marge checked her watch. "It's about five. You've been here since before noon. Everybody's been wondering if you were going to wake up at all."

I noticed the tubes in my arm. "Did I drown?"

"Obviously not completely," said Marge. "Gram pulled you out of the water."

"Gram—?"

Marge nodded. "Some guys at the construction trailers saw her dragging you up onto the beach."

"My ribs hurt like hell."

"Amateur CPR," said Marge. "A two hundred twenty pound construction jock worked you over pretty good. They used a CB to raise an ambulance from town. Doc said you were real close." She began to cry in earnest. "But you made it," she said between sobs.

I reached across my body with my right hand and clumsily squeezed her arm. "I'm okay," I said, hoping I sounded more positive than I felt. "Tell me some more what happened."

Marge's eyes brimmed again and she honked into a Kleenex. "Tell *me* what happened! What were you and Gram doing out at the reservoir? Why were you in the water?" Her voice kept rising unsteadily. "What was going on, Angie?" Her fingers dug into my shoulder.

I realized each of us was grasping the other as though we both were trying to save a drowning woman. I consciously loosened my grip first. After a time, Marge did the same.

"What happened?" she said again.

"I'm still figuring it out," I said. "It was all very — odd."

Her face seemed to mirror a sad triumph. "So I was right?"

"About what?"

"To get you to help. Instead of the Hardy Boys again."

I couldn't help laughing, even if my ribs seemed to flare incandescently. "You were right, Marge."

Marge's voice tightened. "I still want to know what happened in the

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reservoir. You almost drowned, Angie. What did my mother have to do with that?"

I had ridden on Gram's coattails, I thought. My brain still meshed fuzzily, but something irised down into shocking clarity. "Where's Gram?" I said. "How is she?"

Marge suddenly looked like someone had slammed her across the stomach with a pole. As if on cue, machinery squeaked from beyond the open doorway in the hospital corridor. I glanced up past Marge. A nurse pushed an old woman in a wheelchair past the room. The woman was Gram O'Brien.

I looked her in the eyes for just a moment. Gram didn't see me. Her eyes were dull and drug-glazed. I stared back at Marge. "What did they *do* to her?"

Marge hesitated. Finally she said, "It's not just them. I agreed with the doctor."

"Gram's doped to the eyeballs."

Marge nodded slowly. "It's just sedation. It's only temporary."

I said evenly, "You can't keep her caged up that way."

"Just for a while. I don't want her to be hurt any more."

I ignored the platitude. "What are you so afraid of?" I put my hand back on hers. Things started to lock into place in my mind like tumblers falling in sequence.

"I'm afraid for you because of what happened. I'm afraid for Gram because of what she might do next."

I could almost see the patterns now. "To herself? To you? The rest of the family? To others?" Marge shook her head, mute. I had the feeling that her answer should be: *to all of us.*

"If I send her back to the home," Marge said, "She'll just keep on walking away."

The fluorescents didn't vary in intensity, but the room might as well have been plunged into clear white light. "Take her home," I said. "*Your* home — not Riverview Manor." Marge didn't meet my gaze. "Do this for me. It's my advice. Believe me when I say it's more than just important. Take her home and get her off the goddamned pills." The twinges in my sides irritated me. "And while you're at it, take me home too. Call the doctor now. It doesn't matter how we do it, but I'm getting out of here." I caught Marge's eye and she slowly nodded.

I lay back against the pillow and started to gather my strength.

Sometimes I have to be reminded that clear sight doesn't necessarily need to generate from spells or potions.

Naturally it didn't turn out to be as easy to escape from County Memorial as it had been for Gram to walk out of Riverview Manor. The doctor wasn't minded to let me go all that quickly. Finally Marge mediated a compromise: I would stay in the hospital overnight for observation. If I didn't turn blue or my lungs collapse before morning, I'd

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belet go. Marge was, however, able to get instant custody of her mother, contingent upon repeated promises to keep the old woman quiet and unexcited. My room was in the hospital wing facing the street, and I watched as Marge and an orderly wheeled Gram out to the Ford truck like some elderly vegetable in a shopping cart.

That night I dreamed a violent dream.

I stood on the bank of the Trapper River, looking up at the power plant. Low on the horizon behind it, the sun haloed the blocky structure in a fuzz of crimson. Then it was as though the ground itself rose up and fell upon the plant with the crazy violence of a madman wielding a hammer. Brick separated from brick, cinder block from block, and concrete pulverized to powder, leaving twisted spaghetti works of steel reinforcing rods. What had taken years to build was devastated in a second.

The dust hurt my eyes and I rubbed them.

Gram O'Brien stood beside me atop the vast heap of rubble. Beside us both stood Marge. An aura of ghostly radiance spread like St. Elmo's fire around the three of us. Gram turned in a half-circle to survey the buckled cooling towers, the collapsed steam stacks. Then she swung back to face Marge.

Marge looked away, turned away, walked away. The radiance continued to limn her, trailing after like sparkling mist. Gram spread her hands helplessly, standing fast and watching. Marge's image diminished in the distance. Gram turned to face me and slowly shook her head.

I stood alone on the hill of broken stone and felt first grim satisfaction, and then the sadness, the grief of loss.

Marge came to collect me late in the morning. By that time, the doctor had checked my vital signs and given me a lecture concerning the dangers of cramps while swimming. When that was over, I pieced together a clean outfit from the bag Marge had brought me the day before from the motel. Dressed, I waited impatiently until I saw her park in front of the hospital.

"How's Gram?" I said in the truck.

"Pretty much out of it. She slept all night. I got her some breakfast this morning, but she was groggy. When I left, she was sleeping again." As an apparent afterthought, Marge said, "I sent Lily over to her father's." Lily was Marge's daughter. I had wanted to meet her.

"What for?" I said.

"Seems like a good idea." She shrugged slightly. "Whatever's happening, right now I don't want it to involve any more than the three of us." Her voice was firmer than I'd heard it before.

I wasn't as steady on my feet as I'd thought. Once back at the trailer, we sat and drank tea. Every ten or fifteen minutes, Marge would check her

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mother sleeping in the bedroom. The first time, I accompanied her. Gram looked much shorter asleep. More vulnerable. She snored peacefully.

Late in the afternoon, Marge called my name from the bedroom. I walked in and found Marge sitting at the head of the bed, and Gram stirring.

"Thank God," said Marge. "It's about time."

Gram's eyes, disconcertingly green and focused, snapped open. She looked from Marge to me and back to her daughter. "I truly do loathe hospitals," she said. "Child, you should have brought me home immediately." Marge said nothing. "You look a little peaked," Gram said to me. "How is that bum foot, Angela?"

I glanced down even though I couldn't see the bandage. "It's just fine," I said.

"Now," said Gram, "Would one of you please get me a hot cup of tea?"

Marge obeyed without a word.

The old woman and I stared at each other.

"I'm glad I could get you out of the valley," she said.

"Me too."

She exhaled deeply. "You saw."

"I know what I *think* I saw."

"It's evident that you're a woman of powers."

"I could say the same to you," I said. I heard a cup smash in the kitchen.

"I've had longer to become adept." Gram smiled. "Between my Celtic forebears and my Menomonee blood, I seem to have a feel for it."

"When I was growing up," I said, "I had no idea about you."

"Nor I about you," said Gram. "I guess early-on we all learn to be pretty self-protective."

Marge came back into the room gingerly carrying Gram's tea. The cup clattered in the saucer. She sat down and watched her mother sip.

"My daughter's self-protective," Gram said. Her voice stayed gentle, but added: "If she had her way, she'd stay deaf, dumb, and blind." Marge's face tightened. "But, then, most everybody in the family's the same these days. I've had hopes for Lily — she's still young and open."

"Shut up!" Marge's fingers whitened around the arms of her chair. She immediately looked chagrined at having snapped at her mother.

"My family." Gram looked rueful. "No one wants our legacy."

"Legacy!" said Marge. "Curse."

"Nothing sinister about it," said Gram evenly. "There's certainly nothing shameful in being what a body can be. You're my daughter. Just like Lily, down deep you have the powers too."

"Superstition," said Marge, her voice compressed.

"You know better," I said to her. "We've talked. You can't have it both ways."

"I want to leave," Marge said. "I want to walk through that door and go

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for good." She stood and started toward the door. Power seemed to hum, to rise. I felt like the room was awash in electricity. Marge stopped. I knew I wasn't halting her. I had the feeling that neither was it Gram. The power rose, subsided, rose again.

"It's not something you should fight," I said to Marge, "any more than you can fight having the genes for red hair and green eyes and fine cheekbones."

"I just don't want it," said Marge. She reminded me of a bundle of willows, bowed and bound by fragile twine, ready to burst apart.

"But you've got it," I answered. "Now don't walk away from it." I looked from Marge back to Gram. "Don't walk away from her." I wasn't sure which of them I meant to say it to.

No one said anything for several minutes. Then something in Marge's rigid posture seemed to melt. "Angie," she said, here voice low, "I want to talk to my mother."

I looked at them both and got up and left.

Outside the trailer, I sat on the bottom step. The Siberian husky, Roger, came up to me and tried to lick my face. I gathered him into my arms and hugged him, burying my face in his fur, until his ribs must have been every bit as sore as mine.

I sat in the shade of the tall, gnarled cottonwoods, drinking iced tea with lemon and just a little sugar. I sat in a comfortable lawn chair beside the woman of powers, the woman who knew the special sense of the land.

I was vacationing outside the world, and enjoying it.

I was living inside a ghost.

"I expect I could kill the power plant with a long-time drought," Gram said. "I could manage that. But I don't want to. I've got too many old friends still dry-land farming on the Flats. They need their wheat." She refilled my glass. Moisture beaded the outside of the pitcher. "Surely is a lovely morning, Angela."

I nodded and half-closed my eyes. Broken by branches, sunlight dappled my face with patches of heat. The patches moved as wind swayed the crowns of the trees.

"Course, I could do something directly to the plant people," Gram continued, "make all the women barren and cause the men's penises to fall off." She shook her head. "Guess I just don't have the mean streak any more. Besides, they didn't come up with the idea of killing the land. They're just trying to make a living like everyone else."

I opened my eyes and looked slowly around at the impossible serenity of this place. "How long do you figure you can go on living in the middle of the ghost of a drowned valley?" I said.

"Until I pass on." Her tone was certain. "The shade will remain long after I've gone. It will be here offering refuge to anyone who believes, anybody

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who's willing to see it."

"Marge?"

"Perhaps eventually. Marge, or Lily. Or you. You see now. You believe, and so the shade accepts you."

"I love it here," I said.

"It is seductive. It certainly is a place to kill time." She chuckled and got up from her chair. "Time for chocolate-chip cookies to come out of the oven." Gram moved toward the white-painted porch. "When you go back, will you tell my daughter I'm doing the only thing I can?"

I promised I would, but added, "I truly believe she'll be finding out for herself."

Gram turned back toward me from the kitchen doorway and nodded slightly. "I suspect she will." She hesitated. "You helped, Angela, and I do thank you." Then she looked at me fiercely and said, "You should leave soon and go back. You still have another life."

"Soon," I agreed, again closing my eyes and hearing the screen door click shut. Soon. Didn't I deserve some rest? I'd always found peace for me in precious poor supply.

I started to relax. Soon I would walk away from this valley and return to the world.

That was clear sight.

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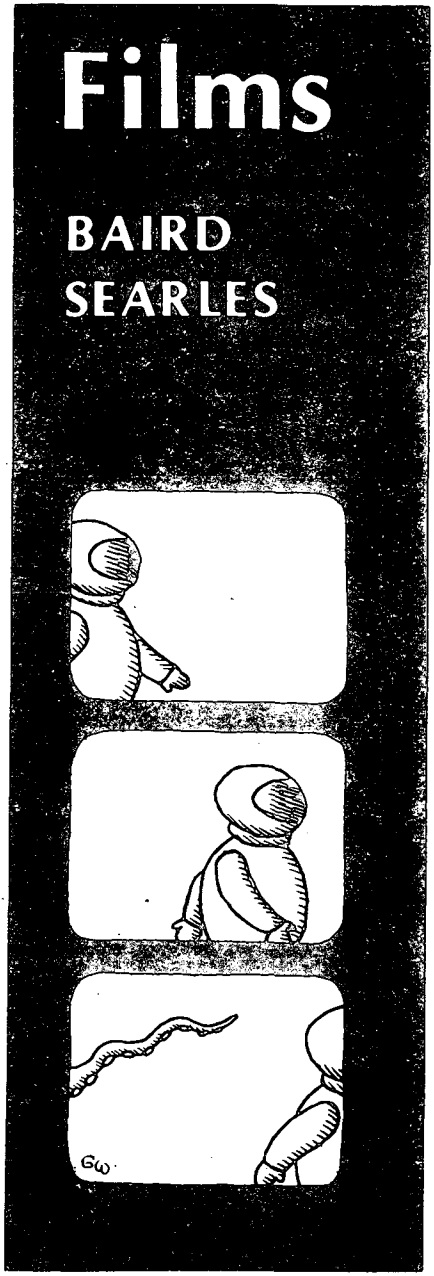
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

HYPERBORING

By the time this sees print, the above title apropos *Conan, the Barbarian* will probably be the cliché of the year, since it is so absolutely perfect. But for that very reason, there's no way to avoid using it.

So at last there is the *Conan* movie, which many of us never thought we'd live to see. This is particularly true of those of us who date back a way, and a look back at Conan's history might not be out of place, since unless you'd never heard of him, the antecedents perforce shape how you view the film.

Conan was created by the prolific pulp writer Robert Howard for the pages of Weird Tales in the 1930s; with his untimely death in 1936, and the changing mode in fantasy (during the '40s, heroic fantasy was *out*, whimsy and s/f were *in*), it seemed that Conan would forever be relegated to the flaking pages of old pulps.

But the seed of a cult had been formed; Howard's vision had made its impression, and around 1950 collections of Conan stories began to appear from a small, semi-professional publisher, and slowly, Conan conquered. Heroic fantasy revived with a vengeance in the mid-1960s, mostly due to the popularity of Tolkien. Conan comics and paperbacks appeared, and the dry spring of 20 years before belched forth a flood of spin-offs, rip-offs, additions to the Conan canon, and Clonans by the

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score.* *Conan the Movie* was inevitable; the big question was, how would it be done?

Let me note that I'm not a Conan snob. I've enjoyed the stories over the years, and I consider Howard a vastly important factor in American fantasy. He was a Texan, at a time when the frontier was well within living memory, and he took the beautiful, but pastel and jaded created-world fantasies of the English such as Dunsany and gave them a rough, brawling vitality, thereby creating a whole new thing.

The Conan stories are certainly naive, crude, and full of thud and blunder; they are also intelligent, creative, and wonderfully imaginative. *Conan the Barbarian the Movie* has, as might be expected, emphasized the former set of qualities and neglected the latter.

Howard's major accomplishment was to create the world of the Hyborian Age, perhaps not as subtle or sophisticated as Middle Earth, but certainly as real. He evoked it with imaginative flair and color, and it was a viable, ongoing, epic setting. Very little of this gets through in the movie; it comes across like what's happening in the next county in an old Hercules flick. I would guess the vast majority of the audience hasn't the vaguest that they're not seeing something historical-mythological a la *Clash of the Titans* — Cimmeria sounds as remotely familiar as Argos to most folk.

This is reflected in another way in the sets and costumes, which are downright dull. And this is where the cinematic medium should have been able to communicate the idea of a created, exotic world even if the script couldn't. But the entire look of the film seems to be of the Heavy Metal school of visual fantasy, which can be epitomized by that current cliché, the crowned skeleton on a skeletal horse. This is imaginative?

(There was one moment, inexplicably, when my eye suddenly felt — *fantasy*. It was a transition scene, with the female thief Valeria skewering people in a warren of dark corridors. There was something about the lighting, and the scale of the figures on the screen, that just for a second, caught it.)

Don't get me wrong — I'm not being the Howard purist nattering about details; I don't expect *Conan the Movie* to be *Conan the Book*. But if a film is drawn from the written word, it had better give us the overall qualities of the source, or something as good. *Conan the Barbarian* does neither.

The overt fantasy in the film (as opposed to the setting) is equally disappointing. Early on there's a standard-issue giant snake; later on, James Earl Jones turns into another of the same, in an inordinately uninteresting and specially ineffective manner. (A special ef-

**Keeping track of, and sorting out Howard's work in general, and Conan's history in particular, is a lifetime occupation.*

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fect that isn't a special effect is specially ineffective, if you're following.)

There's a voluptuous witch that goes up in smoke, and some amorphous demons that resemble the screen of a space invaders game during a brown-out. For a film of this length (I swear it goes on as long as the Hyborian Age itself), that's a poor showing for any kind of screen magic.

The movie as a whole is a pretty patchy job with the look of having been pulled apart and put together again several times. It comes to at least three climaxes, none of them big enough. (In one, Conan is attacked by the horde of the villian, Thulsa Doom — never before have I seen a horde consisting of nine people.)

There remains only to mention Mr. Schwarzenegger and the comic high points of the film, which aren't necessarily the same thing. Let's put it this way — Mr. S. is not embarrassing in the same way that Steve Reeves was not embarrassing. I can quibble with his appearance, though — my Conan is lither, less inflated; with the strong chin and '40s page boy, from the neck up there's a strong resemblance to Linda (*Forever Amber*) Darnell. (From the neck down, there's no contest — her bust development was never that good.)

There are a couple of lines, though, that will forever stay in my memory. One is King Osric's, *re* Thulsa Doom's ophidian-oriented church services: "At first I thought it was just another snake cult." The other is gasped by Valeria as she lies expiring in Conan's arms. "Kiss me! Let me breathe my last breath into your mouth!" Even Robert Howard might have been unnerved by that one.

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R. A. Lafferty's last story here was "Thou Whited Wall," January 1977. The new story below is vintage Lafferty, the amusing tale of the magnetic Bridie Caislean and her encounter with a haunted Irish castle.

Square and Above Board

BY

R. A. LAFFERTY

The people were young and the season was springtime.

It was said of young Midas Muldoon that he was a complex man, but this was a lie. He was as straightforward as a crooked man could be. He wanted power, he wanted prestige, and he wanted whopping wealth. He wanted to be envied. He wanted to be hated and admired at the same time. He wanted to make people crawl. He wanted to make people quake in fear. Certainly those were all straightforward aims, and in Midas there was never any element of concealment.

Midas had been given his curious name by his father Croesus Muldoon, a confidence man who always swore that he would live and die in a great stone castle. And he did die in a great stone castle of sorts, one of the outskirts of McAlester Oklahoma. Midas, like his father, liked to bet. And he liked to fight. He was athletic, magnetic, and champion at the game of checkers or draughts.

In contrast to Midas, his best friend Cristopher Kearny was an intricate and convoluted fellow. He often stopped to think things over, and you can get eaten alive doing that. This being-eaten-alive was never fatal to Cris however. For him, it was one way of getting to the very inside of a situation, or a corporation. He was an inventor, a promoter, an investor. He had only a nominal lust for wealth, and yet he began to acquire rapid wealth while still quite young; and he did this by being an insider in very many ways.

Cris was not athletic; he was not magnetic (he said that only the base metals were magnetic); and he was not a checkers champion. His game was chess. He did not like to fight, or bet. He won a lot of bets, it's true, some of

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them large ones, some of them from Midas Muldoon. In these cases however Cris was not betting. Midas was always betting, but Cris was always riding an inside sure thing. Midas Muldoon and Cristopher Kearney were rivals in many things.

One of the things that they were rivals for was Bridie Caislean, a very pretty and devious and intelligent girl. And Midas Muldoon always seemed to be very far ahead on this particular rivalry.

When Cris Kearny was twenty-two years old, his auditor Linus Caislean told him that he had just become a millionaire.

"It couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow," Linus said, "nor could the other good news that Bridie has just told me of you have happened to a nicer fellow. I heartily welcome you into the family."

Something about this came very near to puzzling Cris, but he hadn't become a millionaire at twenty-two by allowing himself to be puzzled very much or very long. So when Bridie Caislean came into Cris' little office exactly one minute after her father Linus Caislean had walked out of it. Cris looked at her and asked her only one word: "When?"

"There's two things I like about you, Cris honey," Bridie said. "One of them is that you catch onto things quick. The other one is that you're a millionaire now. I've been doing the work on your account for papa, you know. Oh, one month from today, the first day of June we'll get married. Midas Muldoon will whip you when he hears about it, of course. He may even kill you. That's the day when *he* was supposed to marry me, and he doesn't know any different yet."

"Midas will neither whip me nor kill me, but neither will he give you up as easily as that. He'll stay in the race all the way down to the wire, and he's especially tricky in the back-stretch. But there's no way that he can acquire a million dollars within a month; and I can't think of anything that could hook you better than a million dollars."

"Neither can I," Bridie Caislean said.

Bridie herself was quite magnetic. She had sufficient of base metal, iron and steel, in her for that. She also had an amalgamated heart: one part pure gold, one part quick mercury, and eight parts brass.

Bridie had been beauty queen at North-Central State A & M Tech (she'd have been beauty queen even at Harvard if she'd gone there) and she was an extravagantly attractive girl. She was as straightforward in her aims as was Midas Muldoon, and she had a talent for being on the inside of things that was at least equal to that of Cris Kearny. She was full of fun and interests, and she was the only thing that Cris had ever envied Midas. Now he was quite pleased to be marrying her.

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"What are you thinking about, dear?" Bridie asked Cris one sunny day during their engagement.

"Oh, of all the ancient terrors," Cris said, "of the Sea Monster that is the most primordial of the terrors, of the loathsome and murderous disease that will be diverted from its victim only by another victim, of ghosts that return with the sea-wrack of their deaths still on them. And most of all I was thinking of the terror of falling, though in the sunny little day-dream reverie I've just been having the fall is only a piddling thousand feet. But the terror of falling is the most over-riding terror of them all. Did you know that even bright Lucifer, a winged creature, was so terrified of the depths before him that he forgot to use his wings and so fell like lightning?"

"Cris, Cris, maybe you are just terrified of marrying me."

"Fear of marriage is one of the ancient terrors, yes, but it's a minor one of them. But strangely enough, in my afternoon daydream, I do *not* marry you."

"Then throw that daydream away. It's flawed. Forget it. Is your cousin Colin Kearny coming to our wedding, have you heard? I've phoned him. He says that he may come. I just believe that I will phone him again and make sure that he comes. Hey, we sure did get acquainted fast on that transatlantic telephone!"

"How did you know that I had a cousin named Colin Kearny?"

"How did I know that you have a cousin who has five times as much money as you have? Honey, would I miss something like that when I was running a check on you? I'm thorough. Two million Irish pounds, and a Castle in Ireland besides. Oh, I'll get him to come somehow!"

"Bridie, in your slippery little mind you're not thinking of switching to a man you've never even seen? You're capable of it."

"Of course I'm capable of it, but I'll stick to Plan A for the moment at least, and you're Plan A. You are Colin's first cousin. He has a terminal disease that will allow him to live less than two years more. How sad that it should happen to one so young! You are his only kindred in the world, and he has not made a will yet. That must be remedied. He must come to our wedding and he must make his will to us."

"How do you know that he hasn't made his will?"

"Oh, I learned that from a chatterbox young lady who works for Colin's lawyer in Cork. There's lots of information to be garnered by transatlantic phone. I learned too that the name of his Castle, Cearnog Ficheall, means the Chess Squares. The chatterbox who laughs with a brogue told me that it's because the Castle is above Chess Square Valley where there are alternate fields of light flax and dark hops that look like a checkerboard. And every seven years they change them and grow the hops where the flax had

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been and the flax where the hops had been. The chatterbox and myself have become great friends. I asked her how much she weighed and she said fifteen stone. Fifteen stone translates into pounds as 'fat'. The ideal world is one in which all the girls except myself are fat. Why didn't you tell me that you had a cousin with two million Irish pounds, a castle, and a terminal disease?"

"All three are recent acquisitions. Until a year ago he was only a poor relation in the castle of a rich uncle. And the name of the Castle, Cearnog Ficheall or Chess Squares, is really an euphemism for Cearnog Fuil or Bloody Squares. Cearnog is our family name 'Kearny', and it does mean a square, or squares."

"How apt, beloved square! How opportune! Oh, things will go swimmingly!"

And things did go swimmingly, right up to the eve of the wedding, even though Bridie hadn't been able to get Cousin Colin to make a will during the week he had been in town.

"Oh, I couldn't will such a monstrous castle and the monstrous entailments that accompany it to two such nice people as you and Cris," Cousin Colin always said. "No, no, you two have become much too dear to me for that."

"The more monstrous the castle the better," Bridie insisted. "It isn't any prosaic castle that I intend to inherit. Does it have a ghost?"

"Indeed it does, half a dozen ghosts, and the bones of some of them are still far below the castle on the rocky and forbidding shore. It's quite a fall that they take when they go through the floor in the Great Checkerboard Dining Hall of the castle. It breaks almost every bone they have. And then the Sea Monster (he's carried on the Castle Rolls as the 'Old Retainer of the Castle') comes and strips all the flesh off of the new bones. The whole situation has given the castle something of a bad name."

"You're being droll, Cousin Colin," Bridie said. "My own name, Bridie Caislean, means both Brigid of the Castle or Bride of the Castle, and I insist that my name shall be fulfilled. See! I already have done all the work. I have the will drawn up here. All you have to do is sign it."

"Some days I just don't believe in signing documents after noon."

"But yesterday you said that some days you don't believe in signing documents *before* noon, and then I never could find you after noon."

"Some days it's one way, Bridie, and some days it's the other way," Cousin Colin said.

But it was Midas Muldoon who struck up an exceptionally close friendship with Colin Kearny during the week that Colin was in town before the wedding of Cris and Bridie. They played checkers together a lot. Midas

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said that he was champion of America. Colin said that he was champion of Ireland and of all Europe as well as the Straits Settlements and Madagascar and Patagonia. Colin had sought his fortune in the latter three places while he was in his late teens. They played very close, and a canny observer would have noticed that both of them were holding back a little bit.

Then, at Cris' bachelor party the night before the wedding, Midas and Colin tied one on together. It was quite sloppy, but here also an astute observer might have noticed that each was holding something back. They slashed their arms and mingled their blood and became blood brothers forever. It was that kind of bash. Then they began to play checkers for extravagant stakes, though each of them seemed to have trouble even seeing the board. They played for such high stakes as almost to preclude their being serious.

Finally, when the fiasco had run its course, Midas Muldoon had won the Castle in Ireland as well as the two million Irish pounds from Colin. And Colin just happened to have deeds and assignment papers in his pockets, and he spread them out to sign everything over to Midas. Then Cris pulled Colin aside.

"Cousin Colin, I cannot allow this nonsense to go any further," Cris said. "Do not sign anything. Not anything."

"Don't spoil it, Cris," Cousin Colin said in a low voice, and he was totally sober. "Don't spoil it now. Oh, I've conned this fellow into becoming blood brother of me, and he thinks he's conned me into it. I've conned him into taking deed to the castle and taking conveyance to the two million Irish pounds that are one of the entailments of the castle. And he never even suspects, Cris. Oh, I love myself when I pull a smart one like this. It gives me top pleasure to outsmart people."

"However have you outsmarted Midas Muldoon, Cousin Colin? There's been a horrible mistake."

"I love you, Cousin Cris, when you pretend not to understand a trick like this," Cousin Colin chortled. "Oh wonderful, wonderful! Don't spoil it."

So the mysterious business was consummated.

Bridie Caislean came by Cris' place and waked him quite early the next morning. Cris was pleasantly befuddled from the Imperial Irish Brandy (a gift of Cousin Colin) that they had indulged in the night before, and he had a feeling that something had gone amiss. And he did not, for the barest moment there, quite catch the import of Bridie's chatter.

"There is no reason for Midas and I to be out expense when everything for a luxury wedding is already standing ready and is already paid for by you, Cris," Bridie was saying. "I've always loved your habit of paying all extraordinary expenses immediately and on the spot. And Midas and I can use the

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same airplane tickets and hotel reservations (how nice that you paid them in advance) for our honeymoon just as well as you and I could have used them."

"You and Midas Muldoon?" Cris asked.

"Well sure," Bridie bubbled. "Midas won the Castle and the two million Irish pounds from Cousin Colin (that's about five million American dollars, with a Castle thrown in), so of course I'm marrying Midas instead of you this morning. There's a sort of poetic justice here too. This is the day I was supposed to marry Midas in the first place, before I was supposed to marry you, and now I'm supposed to marry him again. Isn't it nice that things always work out so nice for me?"

So this other not-too-mysterious business was consummated also. Midas Muldoon and Bridie Caislean were married that morning. And Cristopher Kearny was left with an empty sort of feeling.

It was just one year later that Bridie Muldoon phoned Cris Kearny from Castle Cearnog Ficheall in Ireland.

"Come and visit us, Cris, and the sooner the better," she said. "We are so happy here that we want to share our happiness with somebody, and as the best friend of both of us you are the logical choice. If you start sometime today you can be here sometime tomorrow."

"That'd be a good slogan for a travel agency to use. What's your angle, girl of a thousand angles?"

"No angle, Cris. This is the new Bridie. I'm kind, I'm benevolent, unselfish, altruistic, and one other word that I forget. Where's your gambling instinct? Come and take a chance on a visit to us."

"I never gamble, Bridie. I go only for sure things."

"It's a sure thing that we want to see you, Cris. Do come."

Chris left sometime that day and his plane was over Ireland sometime the next day. From the air he saw the checkerboard of light and almost white fields of flax and of dark and almost black fields of hops. He saw the Castle (for they were already in their descent), and something twanged in his heart-strings like a harp tuned a little bit flat. It may have been the piles of whiteness on the stoney shore below the Castle that gave him the queer flat feeling. And no more than twenty miles from the Castle he was down at Cork International Airport.

He went first to the office of a lawyer in Cork. This was the lawyer of Cousin Colin, and he was also the lawyer of Cris Kearny now, for Irish affairs at least. The lawyer was not in, but the lawyer's assistant was full of news and good cheer and advice.

"Remember that you are in Ireland now," said this assistant who was a merry and ample person who laughed with a brogue. "This place is full of *draiocht*."

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"Yes, *draiocht*, magic, especially the voices of the people," Cris agreed.

"Moreover you are in County Cork. And here, especially in the castles and the crags, it is likely to be the *draiocht dorcha*."

"Oh yes, dark magic or baleful magic. And what do you recommend to ward off this dark or baleful magic, lawyer assistant?"

"Chicken blood. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And be advised also that the terminal disease, called here only the 'loathsome disease', can be entailed along with the castle, like any other entailment, onto the new owner of the castle. If the entailment rite is not broken, then the new owner will have the fatal disease, and the old owner will have it no longer. And the new and entailed owner of the castle will die of the disease within two years. Medical science now confirms that this really happens."

"I'm a great admirer of medical science myself. Is there a specific against the entailment of the loathsome disease? And how *is* Cousin Colin these days?"

"Chicken blood is the specific against the loathsome entailment, as it is against so many other things. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And your Cousin Colin is presently vacationing in foreign parts. Rio, I believe, is the name of the place. He had several recent fortunes that were *not* entailed, you know. He has willed them to you, but you may have to wait a hundred or more years to inherit them considering the exuberant and brawny health he has enjoyed for this last year. Remember too, Cristopher Kearny, that old precept: 'Beware of the Overseas Irish bearing Castles'."

"I thought it was: 'Beware of Greeks bearing Gifts'."

"Same thing. Look at an Overseas Irishman sideways and he could just as well be a Greek. You will be offered a castle, yes, and its double entailment; aye, and a thousand years free supply of bones on the shore below it into the bargain. When you accept the deed to the castle you will sign a very curious codicil to that deed."

"How do you know that it is a curious codicil, lawyer's assistant?"

"Oh, I drew it up for them at the castle. This entailed gift will come about through the bloody swearing of the blood-brotherhood and through the checker-playing in big Checkerboard Hall. When you play those dire games of checkers you will lose if you lose, and you will only seem to win if you win. If you win you will lose by dying of the loathsome terminal disease within two years."

"And again, lawyer's assistant, is there not a specific against this terrible misfortune of the checker games turning against me and gobbling me up?" What a pleasant and *roomy* person this lawyer's assistant was!

"Once again the specific against

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this luckless gaming is chicken blood. I'll draw some for you from the cock in the yard before you leave. And there is one square in Checkerboard Hall on which the Master of the Castle has himself placed when he is in his last agony from the loathsome disease. At the moment of his death, the square opens and dumps him on the rocks a thousand feet below: and a friendly Sea Monster comes and strips the flesh from the bones. It's a good arrangement. Persons dying of the loathsome disease may not be buried in Irish Ground lest they contaminate it. And they become so smelly when left unburied. Some of the bones are from old guests who were robbed and had their throats cut by old Castle Masters; and then, being placed on the dire square, they were likewise dumped at their death moment and had their bones stripped."

"All Irish castles have mottos. What is the motto of this Castle Cearnog Ficheall, lawyer's assistant?"

"The motto of Castle Cearnog Ficheall is *Cearnog Agus Cionn Mbord* or 'Square and Above Board'. And yet with a different intonation and a different viewpoint, that out of the eyes of a dead person on the stoney shore below the Castle for instance, the motto could as well be Englished 'Och, *That Square* in the Board Above!' and this would be in the tone of a warning. And now you must be going if you're to be in time for supper at the Castle. But first we'll gather the blood."

Out in the yard, the lawyer's assistant drew a small sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a loud voice.

The lawyer's assistant drew a second sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a weak voice.

The lawyer's assistant drew a third sackful of blood from the cock. It stood still for the drawing, and then it crowed in a sad and broken voice and fell over dead.

"He'll be good for after-midnight supper tonight," the lawyer's assistant said. "I love blooded rooster roasted on a spit. My mother will pluck it and draw it and roast it and have it ready. I'll drive you to the castle now. It's but twenty miles or thirty *cilomeadar*. Och, it's no trouble. I often drive that far in a single week."

The lawyer's assistant got Cris to the Castle at suppertime.

"How old are you, lawyer's assistant?" Cris Kearny asked.

"I'm twenty-two this springtime, and everyone else in the world is twenty-three," she said. "How ideal! I'll be back for you about midnight. Your business at the Castle should be consummated by then."

Then she laughed, with a brogue.

Cristopher Kearny blew the burnished trumpet that was set into the front door of Castle Cearnog Ficheall

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or Chess Squares Castle, and at the same time he splatted one sack of the cock's blood on the same door as a specific against misfortune coming to him within.

Then Midas Muldoon flung the door open, and Bridie and Midas greeted him with great affection. Oh, they made big over him, and they showed him all around the wonderful Castle. He saw everything that could be seen by torchlight. Bridie even introduced him to three of the Castle Ghosts. These were quite urbane and elegant entities and somewhat more at their ease than were Midas and Bridie Muldoon. The Muldoons seemed to have just a touch of the jitters.

And then it was no time at all till they were all sat down to a wonderful supper in the Great Checkerboard Dining Hall. There is something excessively black-and-whitish about the term 'checkerboard', but in the Dining Hall it was not so. The great squares (each the dimension of the First Master of the Castle and he had been a tall man) were royally colored. The white was really a sort of golden ivory, and the black was really midnight ocean-blue with touches of French Lilac and Royal Purple. And by the torchlight of the Dining Hall (Irish Castles have electricity only in the bathrooms; it would be a vulgar intrusion anywhere else) the effect was enchanting.

The courses of that supper were like a litany of the great dishes of 'Supper in Heaven': Gamecock, Rampant Ram, Truculent Trout (each trout glared at one with angry and living eyes from the plate, but that could only have been the effect of the torchlight), Gored Ox, Young Foal of Horse: what great dishes they were on that supper table! There were seven sorts of brandy to go with the seven courses, and seven little piles of snuff were on the serviette at each place.

Seven brandies made each of them a little drunk and more than a little effusive. There came the moment when Midas Muldoon insisted that he and Cristopher should slash their forearms and mingle their blood and so become blood brothers.

Cris was thankful that it was torchlight as he worked his bloody deception with the second sackful of blood. The outcome, of course, was that Midas Muldoon became blood-brother of a cock that was two-and-a-half hours dead. Had it been otherwise, the loathsome disease would have passed out of the blood of Midas and into that of Cris as part of the deeding-and-entailment rite.

And then the supper was cleared away, and a checkerboard and more brandy brought. And Midas suggested that they play checkers for moderately high stakes and for the championship of America and Ireland and all Europe as well as the Straits Settlements and Madagascar and Patagonia, which latter string of titles Midas had won from Colin Kearny just one year before. Cris agreed, but first (thankful again that

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they had naught but torchlight) he went to one of the squares of the great checkerboard floor (the lawyer's assistant had told him which one it would be) and dribbled a little blood from the third sack on it.

"Be careful of that one square, Cris honey," Bridie warned. "It's — ah — a little precarious."

Then Cris sprinkled the remainder of the third sack of blood on the checkerboard on which they were to play.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Midas," he said. "It is only some of our brothership blood that was still on my arm."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Midas Muldoon gloated. " 'Twill make the rite all the more binding."

They played, and Cris won. They played, and Cris continued to win. They played, and Cris won bigger and bigger bets. They played, and Cris won Castle Cearnog Ficheall itself from Midas Muldoon as will as two million Irish pounds in entailment with the Castle and also 'a more intimate entailment sealed in the blood of undying brotherhood'. The Castle and attending kale consolidated all Midas' losses for the evening.

Bridie Muldon had all the papers ready. Cris received the deed to the Castle and the assignment of the two million pounds. And in turn he signed a codicil to each paper, to the deed, and to the assignment. The codicil to the deed said that Cris would not take possession of the castle until two years and one day had gone by; and in case of his untimely death before that time, ownership of the Castle would revert to the Muldoons. The codicil to the assignment of the two million pounds said that the money would be held in escrow by a legal firm in Cork for two years and one day, after which it would be paid to Cris Kearny; but in case of the untimely death of Mr. Kearny before that time, the money would be returned to the Muldoons.

"It's all *pro forma* stuff, honey," Bridie said. "You don't even need to read it if you don't want to. Just sign it."

"Fine, fine," Cris laughed as he signed the codicils. "All Square and Above Board."

"How odd that you should use that phrase," Midas commented. "You could not have known it, but that is the motto of this Castle Cearnog Ficheall which you now own tentatively."

"Haven't you grown skinnier since your marriage, Bridie?" Cris asked.

"Not at all. I've gained two stone since I've been married. That's twenty-eight pounds. Subconsciously I did it for you. I remember you used to say that I was perfect but that I would be even more perfect if I were a bit more ample. And now I am that."

"Somehow you seem skinnier, Bridie," Cris said.

Daydreams of amplitude. Rather, waking torchlight night dreams of amplitude. The beauties of spaciousness. Why was Cris musing on such things?

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At midnight the trumpet that was inset in the front door blew the merriest tune that ever was heard, like a signature tune of somebody.

"That is a friend who is taking me back to Cork tonight," Cris said. "I'll look in on you at the Castle again tomorrow perhaps."

"Wonderful!" Midas shouted. "It's been wonderful to see you again, Cris."

And after Cris had left, Midas shouted still more loudly: "Wonderful, wonderful! Now I have transmitted the fatal loathsome disease to Cris through the botherhood rite and the entailment rite. And I am free of the sickness, and he will die of it before two years have gone by. And the Castle and the funds will revert to us. Nothing can go wrong, nothing."

"Nothing can go wrong for me at least," Bridie shouted inwardly to herself. "Even if this trick doesn't work, it will work for me. Even if the disease somehow was not transmitted, even if Midas dies of it instead of Cris, I can always marry Cris. He loves me eternally, and nobody else can ever take my place with him. Maybe it will be even better for me if this doesn't work. Then I will have all the fortunes of both Midas and Cris. Isn't it nice that things always turn out so nice for me!"

But Bridie was wrong about nobody ever being able to take her place. And she'd be furious when she found out who it was. Bridie had the beauty, yes, but beauty wasn't everything.

There were such things as amplitude, as Cris realized when he got into the car with the lawyer's assistant at midnight and had an ample kiss from her. There were such things as spaciousness, and merriment. There were even such things as that business of laughing with a brogue.

Oh, Bridie was beautiful, but Sharon (Sharon McSorley was the name of the lawyer's assistant) would make two of her with a bit left over. And you can't have too much of a good thing.

They plighted their troth over an after-midnight supper of rooster hot from the spit, and Spanish sherry.

"When we move into the Castle, in two years and a day, I'm going to make only one change," said full-bodied Sharon. "I'm going to fix that tricky square in Checkerboard Dining Hall so that nobody will ever exit that way again. I've already told the Sea Monster. He says that he can get by on bodies as seldom as one every seven years, but I've told him that there'll be no more at all. He thinks that he may get another appointment at a Castle that overhangs Dingle Bay in Kerry County. Sea-rumor says that there's a good fall of bodies from that Castle.

"I've told the Castle Ghosts that they may remain after we move in. They are pleased entirely with the arrangement. They say that it's always been the case that when the Castle has an ample mistress there will be merry times in the old place."

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In which B. L. Keller ("Flora," June 1982) takes a standard sf theme — immortality via cryonic suspension — and extrapolates it into something quite wild and different.

Cold Debt

BY

B. L. KELLER

My pitch, my sole pitch, was immortality — the ultimate commodity, I thought.

I had no idea what we were really offering.

Now, immured within these limestone walls, charged with making eternity worth living, I see it was impetuous of me to sell my sister.

I should have slaughtered her the summer she arrived.

I first heard of little sister one lovely sullen evening as I crouched in the pantry idly attempting to shave the cat, eavesdropping on Mamma and my new dad.

"It was a dozen years ago," he was saying. "I've never seen the child, only sent money for her support. But now, with the mother sick and penniless, how can I abandon the fruit of an old fling?"

My mother had only recently abandoned her decent widowhood to marry this Harrison Devereaux, and a few weeks after his confession, his ill-flung fruit was shipped us, a pre-pubescent calf who dogged me with mute devotion.

I snagged the lead in the twelfth-grade production of *Hamlet* so that I might stalk our parlor rehearsing those flaming lines:

Nay, but to live
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty!

I did wonders for little sister, playing upon her difficulties with English until she developed a stammer, sympathizing over her excessive height until she began to sidle like Groucho.

Devereaux knew he was outclassed, but he was determined to win me

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over, while his eyes grew mad with torment and the great vessel in his temple swelled. Inevitable that it should rupture. A man so full of insecurities should never indulge in orgies of surpressed rage.

To my surprise, Mamma kept his throw, even cherished her. I left for college in a year-old Toyota because sister Emmaline had to have her teeth straightened.

School was demanding, but I knew that the fuller my social life, the more contacts I'd have to call upon in later years. I came home seldom, and when I did I was kept busy re-establishing potentially useful friendships.

Emmy was not always there. Now and then her mother, after a failed affair or a slovenly suicide attempt, would send for her.

As for myself, when I found that law was not my thing, I tried insurance, mutual funds, public relations, knowing that once I found myself, I'd make it big. With my Apollonian looks and easy charm I was already, as many a Georgetown hostess put it, "the perfect extra man."

And I met Billi, daughter of an honest-to-God, unreconstructed giant of the military-industrial complex. Though he eyed me with weary suspicion, he knew I might be the last best hope of seeing his genus preserved. His only child had, before me, shown a predilection for Democrats and third-world veterinary students.

My Billi — a bit intellectual, but gentle and loving and such a *relief*. The older woman I was with had become insufferable possessive. As I said after one filthy scene: To hell with it! I'd rather live in some rotten walk-up and have my independence.

About this time, my mother slid once more into matrimony. Billi and I drove to Fredericksburg for the ceremony.

At the reception, Mamma cornered me. "You've barely acknowledged John."

"Who is he?"

"John Porter. Your new father."

"You know what I mean. Who *is* he?"

"He's in cryonics."

"My God, Mother, a painter?"

She left me standing with Billi until my newest dad aproached.

"I hear you're into ceramics," I opened.

"Cryonics."

"I can't keep up with these new plastics."

"Cryonic suspension," he said. "A freezing process."

"I suppose you don't sell many these days," Billi murmured over her glass, "with so many people into natural foods."

"My process is for freezing people," he explained, "until a cure is found for whatever did them in."

"Ah! Frozen anyone we know?" I inquired.

Emmy joined us. "The ecological implications bother me, John."

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"Negligible energy expenditure," he assured her. "The units are basically cylinders of liquid nitrogen."

Billi set her glass on a table.

"Merely the space required...." Emmy protested.

Porter was unperturbed. "I'd rotate them."

I had a wavering vision of a forest of encylindered cadavers turning, turning.

"The newer would be kept near the surface as a concession to the family," he went on.

"Hard enough," I observed, "bringing flowers to a cylinder of nitrogen."

"In time, as the immediate survivors pass or are processed, the client is retired to the deeper levels."

"To be defrosted someday in a new, strange world?" Emmy was plainly distressed.

"I'll worry about that when I've got the thawing worked out." he said.

Billi placed her plate carefully upon the buffet.

"You can't bring 'em back alive?" I demanded.

"I can freeze them without significent cellular damage if I get them soon enough. It's only a matter of time before I can reverse the process successfully."

"Maurie...." Billi slumped against me.

Hauling my darling upstairs, I cradled her head to prevent her drowning in the toilet, then lugged her to my room. Wedding gifts were piled on my desk, my chairs, the floor.

I found my sister in the parlor, guests gone, nuptial couple off to a superannuated frolic.

Of all I'd done for Emmaline, little remained. She'd come back from Europe this time without a stammer, with the carriage of an Iroquois hunter, and taken up sculpture in a renovated garage outside of Alexandria. I'd grown as tall as she, so I could look her in the eyes, which was disconcerting, hers being large, lustrous, of a peculiar gold-flecked green.

"There are foreign objects in my room," I said.

"Only for a few days. John's going to use it as a study."

I withdrew with icy dignity and a fifth of Moet. While Billi snored on my lower bunk, I ripped posters and pennants from my walls, then carted my treasures, trophies and the bottle to the attic.

Alone in that airless aerie, I finished the Moet.

In an old trunk, I found my baby albums. God, why hadn't Mamma got me into films?

I pried open another trunk. A violin. Cradling it under my chin, I wept, until I recalled that I had never played the violin. Then I remembered Devereaux, before the shakes got him, sawing away.

I was overwhelmed by obscure *tristesse*, wiles of a summer night, warm champagne.

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Emmy was in the kitchen, shrouding deviled eggs in plastic. As my lips crushed hers, there was the soft *schpla...schpla...schpla* of eggs sliding to the vinyl.

"You incestuous bastard!"

I whirled..."Billi! Baby!"...tried to pursue her across that field of egg.

Six weeks in traction without a word from her, I was barely on my feet when the damned recession hit. Broken, broke, I found haven for a few days with Mom and Dad.

Porter was a fanatic, obsessed with his work. "At minus 196 degrees Centigrade, Maurie, I can halt all deterioration of the body forever. Forever."

Forever. I began to grasp the potential of cryonic suspension. Talk about your universal market! Who faces death without a qualm? I thought of the contacts who'd never done a thing for me, of the years I'd served as extra man.

"Dad," I said, "I'm going to see to it that this contribution to humanity doesn't go down the drain."

And Kryonikera, Inc., was born.

"You concentrate on research," I told Porter. "The rest is my job."

"It'll be easier to attract capital once we get that last bug out."

"Dad! Dad! We don't talk bugs any more! Do the auto makers advertise the little flaws in their new models? Do pharmaceutical houses trumpet the side-effects of their wonder drugs?"

The next months were hell. Everywhere that chilling evasiveness when acquaintances realize what you're selling. Before me success, power ... God, what power! — the power of life and death...and I couldn't get the limits of my credit cards extended.

Mamma's house had been mortgaged to the dry rot. Emmy's only concrete assets were in granite. I even called Billi; all that got me was an invitation to her wedding.

So I borrowed, borrowed where I could, took on the stress of weekly repayments, the spectre of broken legs as late fees.

Feeling a rancor toward my once-beloved, I telephoned Emmaline. "We're invited to Billi's wedding. I've got to show, or be branded a loser."

My sister's heart is perviousness itself.

I picked her up on Sunday. "Good God, Emmy. Crepe soles?"

She slinted those great green eyes at me. So I sidled into the event of the season with an Amazon who looked like a delegate to a Sierra Club convention.

I've never seen a bride so galled.

Men who'd been out to me for months asked where I'd been keeping myself. Billi's father made a tennis date with me, told me to call him Carl.

The doors my little sister opened! Had I guessed at those which were yet to gape, I'd have strangled her before the processional.

Instead, I threw myself into a

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round of lunches, boating, golf, preaching always the revelation that death need not sting the solvent.

The rich are so damned conservative. Only Carl, Billi's dad, really listened.

"This process has been thoroughly tested?"

"Frozen I don't know how many steers without a hitch."

"How do they come out, defrosted?"

"Like a dream." I have had such dreams.

"I want to see for myself."

I managed to procure twin steers and, with a few cosmetic touches, render them indistinguishable.

Porter was a greater problem.

"Dad," I said, "it's a *presentation*. Is the sound system in the dealer's showroom the same one tested by *Hi Fi*? Is the girl in the centerfold really doing it just for you?"

"I'm thinking misrepresentation, Maurie. Fraud."

"Dad, I have put myself on the line for Kryonikera. You know what will happen if I miss another payment? I have triple locks on my windows. I keep a passport in my breast pocket. Sometimes I have this fantasy of waking to find the carburetor of my Maserati leaking on my pillow."

Porter's lab was in the secluded, hilly back-country off a single lane dirt road. The freezing went smoothly. I explained to Carl that defrosting was a slow process. The next day I brought him back to observe the placid, hearty steer.

He summoned me to his office. "How much is the service?"

"We'll work that out when we begin processing clients."

"How about five thousand to sign up, plus a half a million trust fund, payable at my death, to be used for my preservation?"

"Carl, you and I are talking investment, not...."

"I'm not interested in any new ventures at this time. I want the service."

He was adamant. All my efforts for a lousy five thousand and half a million God knew when. Still, I was in no position to turn down any pittance.

I got out the old law books, drew up a contract.

"I don't like it," Porter fretted.

"Dad, we've got creditors straight out of Puzo. You want my blood on your hands? You want their collection crews coming to you when I'm gone?"

"After that presentation, how will you explain that we haven't got all the bugs out?"

"Dad, have you ever heard of seed money? Five thousand will keep our creditors at bay a week, with a little over. The leftover is our seed. You've been reading about the Emir of Karam's visit to Washington? Fleets of limousines, hundred-dollar tips to bellhops, a country with more income than it can invest. You don't just call and make an appointment to meet this Emir. It takes research, chicanery, and

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money, but with backers like him we can mount a crash program in thawing frozen stiffs."

I took the contracts to Carl's office. After the papers were signed, the check was in my briefcase, he came to sit beside me on the suede sofa. "Let me give you a rundown on my medical condition, Maurice."

"Oh, Jesus."

It was harrowing. "I have a few months left, and those degrading and uncomfortable. I've decided to go while everything from my bladder to my senator is under my control. I've been seeing your sister."

"Did you get a second opinion, Carl?"

"I've proposed, but she refused me. Something about the military-industrial complex."

My Sister! "Carl, you haven't mentioned Kryonikera to her?"

"Not a word, until you and I nail down our plans. Then I'll explain that I have a short time, that I want her to inherit my wealth and influence to use in accordance with her conscience. Now, as I understand this Kryonikera, it's essential we do it before I deteriorate irrevocably. A few days after the wedding, I'll take something. You'll be standing by ready to process me."

"Carl, you're talking ..."

"I'm talking half a million for Kryonikera, infinitely more for Emmaline."

"But we hadn't planned on anyone ... going so soon. There's only the prototype, the Kryonikera Custom Futura Supreme."

"It'll do."

"You don't understand."

"I understand contracts, and I have yours right here, nothing in it specifying natural causes."

When I told Porter of Carl's plan, he was aghast. "Impossible! Doesn't he understand the problem?"

"You know how people grasp at straws. But let's look at this thing objectively, Dad. It'll be ages before anyone could cure everything wrong with him. By then, we'll either have the bugs out or be gone ourselves."

"Suppose not. Suppose they come up with cures and we're called upon to...."

"An entrepreneur has to be willing to take risks. Besides, he has a contract."

"Buy it back."

"With what? I had to pay our creditors."

"So he drops dead shortly after marrying your sister. She becomes rich. We freeze him and come into half a million. You think there wouldn't be investigations, hell to pay?"

"That aspect does need refining. Our creditors could put him touch with people who do that sort of thing professionally, fool-proof."

"I will have no part of it."

Spurred by a new desperation, I resumed my assault upon the Emir of Karam. Bribing my way into an outer room of one of his suites took the last of my capital.

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I sat for hours, surrounded by mendicants, diplomats, oil executives. At last a scented monument of blubber bustled out of an inner chamber and beckoned me. "You look exhausted. Come."

In a crowded chamber, he presented me to the Emir. After the proper salutations, I announced I was the bearer of immortality to his Majesty, and made my pitch.

The Emir strode from the room.

That megathere who had ushered me into the presence escorted me from the suite and urged me into an elevator. "How were you to know he had religious scruples? Personally, I found your presentation fascinating." Plump, diamond-encrusted hand on my elbow, he shepherded me into the hotel bar. "Let me buy you a drink. You're surprised that I indulge? But I share neither blood nor belief with my exalted employer. I am foreign talent, his chief advisor, and my own man. You will tell me all about Kryonikera at dinner."

Five dollars in my pocket. Sooner or later, I must at least offer to buy a round. "Dinner. Love to. Only ... ah! I'm supposed to meet my sister."

"Pity." He glanced at his watch. Platinum.

"Wait. Wait. Let me call her."

I telephoned Emmy. "This is life and death. How much can you loan me?"

"All I have is my rent money."

"Bring it. And for God's sake, slip it to me unobtrusively."

I hurried back to my prospect, half afraid to find him vanished like some monstrous djinni. "Would you mind if she joins us for one drink? Then she'll be on her way."

"Fine. Now, about this freezing process...."

"I must warn you not to mention it when my sister comes. She's a little medieval in some ways." She had, in fact, threatened to go to the SPCA and slap an injunction on us if we froze so much as a mouse.

When she arrived, Joseph clasped her slender clay-daubed hand between his gross paws, pressed damp lips to her knuckle. He insisted she join us for dinner. Learning she was a sculptor, he trembled, the shifting of a continent of gelatin. "You must be incredibly ... powerful."

Was no corner of my life free of her intrusion?

"I must see your work," Joseph told her. "I am a collector of...the extraordinary in all things."

"I thought your Emir didn't hold with graven images." The rancor in my voice surprised me. Still, she was my sister.

"The Emir believes, above all, that a man's castle is his home. At any rate, my villa is on an island off the coast of Karam, where mine is the only sovereignty."

When she left, over his pleas, he seemed lusterless, deflated. "There, there now, is a work of art."

He knew that to speak so of a woman related to one of his Emir's

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countrymen would have cost his head, but he'd sensed my vulnerability, recognized that I was hustling.

"A goddess," he murmured.

"With the temper of a Tartar." If I could not afford to insult him, I could at least degrade his ardor.

His eyes narrowed to points of lust. "She has...a great ferocity?"

I saw I was not dealing with a simple man, but anger made me reckless. "Part of her squalid heritage. Her father never acknowledged her. Her mother was some unsavory mix, deported from half the world's hellholes."

"She's not an American citizen?"

"Mere refuse of sundry teeming shores. By the time she was sixteen, she was spending much of her time in Europe, Asia, island stews, nursing her mother through disgusting crises."

"Of course she has friends, connections...."

"Hardly. She's an artist of no consequence."

"You have no feeling for her, no respect for the bond of kinship?"

"Kin? The bastard of my mother's second husband?"

He clicked his tongue. "My dear, you belong in a more virile culture, where the selling of surplus females is part of a sensible mercantile tradition. Did you know that Karam never ratified the U.N. proscription of slavery?"

I'd coddled this monster too long; it was time to return to business. "Politics is not my thing. Now, about Kryonikera...."

"The Emir returns to Karam Saturday, but I'll be here another week. We'll have lunch tomorrow, and you'll take me to see your sister's work."

During the next days, while messages from Carl filled the tape of my answering machine, I took Joseph to Emmy's studio again and again. He bought nothing, commissioned nothing.

"What sensitively," he rhapsodized when we left her. "What subtle fire. And you say she is...quite primitive?"

I found it increasingly hard to keep my hands off him. "Joseph, you'll be returning to Karam in a couple of days. You've turned aside all my efforts to talk about Kryonikera."

"Frankly, my dear, it will never sell. Who would have himself frozen before he is sick or damaged, old or suffering? You know how tedious those types can be. Spouse, children move on to new attachments, new financial ties. Would they truly want the near-departed restored?"

"He'd have our contract."

"With what assurance that in ten, fifty years, there will be a world which honors contracts? Or in which a living fossil, alien to the time, friends and family gone or frozen would...."

"You were never serious about Kryonikera. You used me to get to her."

"No, no. I expressed interest in Kry-

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onikera in order to be with you. Then I met her, and she is so much *more*."

Swine. "Did you even intend to buy her work?"

"If I cannot manage to be alone with her when she is penniless, would I stand a chance once she had money?"

"Hardly. She loathes you."

"Try to restrain that enchanting pique. It's obvious you're in deep trouble, always selling, selling, behind that exquisite mask such savage desperation. You admit you're not fond of her. She has no family, no friends. Would she even be missed!

"You bastard! I wouldn't freeze you if your life depended on it!"

"Think it over, but not too long. The Emir's jet returns for me tomorrow."

When I got home, still shaken by Joseph's loathsome proposition, there were the usual messages on my tape — invitations, Carl's fulminations. Then Porter: "Carl just called. He's coming to the lab. Says you'd better be here."

I arrived as Carl was getting out of his Mercedes — with my sister!

"What do you have to drink?" he asked as Porter admitted us.

Porter tore his gaze from Emmy. "I can make anything." He busied himself among phials and crucibles.

"You had no business bringing Emmaline here," I told Carl.

"We're going to finalize this thing today," he said.

Porter handed him a beaker filled with colorless liquid. "Here you go. Hundred ninety proof."

"In deference to my sister's feelings, I must insist..."

"I told her of my condition on the way over here." Carl tasted, drank deep. "We're going to explain to her now that she would not be precisely a widow."

Porter refilled Carl's beaker, then his own. "I'm not going to be pressured into anything."

"You have brought up a point, though, Carl," I fumbled for my pillbox.... "which is why we might not want to process you at this point in time. Say Emmy should demand we bring you back prematurely."

Carl pressed my sister's hand. "She'd never have me revivified before I could be cured."

"I think Maurice means before they perfect the defrosting," she said.

I swallowed two Quaaludes dry.

As Porter filled the beakers again, Carl assured her, "No problem, love. I've seen it done."

"But you must remember that was a simulation," Porter said. "As Maurice explained..."

"There's no point going into these technicalities," I protested.

"Simulation?" Carl's face had gone chalky, but for a fervid darkening of the brow.

"Another steer. Let me put it in laymen's terms."

"Dad, don't. Don't put it in layman's terms."

"Right now, the internal organs come out kind of mushy."

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For a moment it seemed we'd be faced with the immediate dilemma of whether to honor Carl's contract. Then he reeled from the lab, calling down the FTC, FDA, SEC...completely out of touch with the present.

Shoving Emmy aside, I ran after him.

As I slid into the Mercedes beside him, he was calling down Mike Wallace, Geraldo Rivera. Porter flung himself into the back seat. "Carl, listen...."

The car shot forward.

I reasoned with Carl, begged him to slow, cowered as he hazarded each deadly mountain curve. "Carl, do you know where you're going?"

"Oh, yes." His voice was controlled now. "To my attorneys. Then the Attorney General. I am going to destroy you."

Porter gripped the back of Carl's seat. "Look, I'm as much a victim in this as you."

Carl pulled onto the shoulder. Opening his door, he strode to the lip of the cliff.

Porter leaped out. "Don't be a fool, man!"

Carl unzipped.

"Oh." Porter did the same. "You and I can work out this mess together."

There they were, side by side in that ageless ritual of male camaradie. There I was, key in the ignition.

Sobering to see men of such achievement depart this vale in midstream. What a salute to eternity!

With some reluctance, I sent the Mercedes after them. Barely six thousand miles on her.

I'd struggled half a kilometer back toward the lab, keeping well off the road, when I heard moans, thrashing in the bush. I saw the moped then, and beyond, the oblivious couple. Dear Lord. Will people be roller skating to assignations next?

Emmy came running from the lab as I dismounted. "What's happened?"

"Watch the moped. I'll explain later." Urging her away from the lab, I hurried in and added four Quaaludes to the dregs of Porter's potation.

She was standing in the parking area. "Why am I watching a moped?"

Drawing her to the steps of the lab, I handed her the beaker. "Drink."

"Where are Carl and John?"

"Drink."

"I don't want the damned drink."

"You'll need it."

I was gentle but inflexible. Finally, in exasperation, she downed the mixture. "All right. Where are they?"

"I dropped them off."

After a time her questions, her demands for clear answers, came slower, softer.

When it was done, I telephoned Joseph.

We met at my apartment. When we'd agreed upon the price, cash on delivery, I explained her condition.

Once he recovered a semblance of composure, I said, "Look at it this way — properly refrigerated, she could last forever. It's the only way to get her on

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and off the jet unobtrusively. The unit could pass for a Bufano statue."

He was not willing to pay for her in that state. So we agreed finally that I would get half on delivery, half on restoration.

"You'll bring everything you need to revive her," he said.

"Me?"

"Who else knows about her?"

"You think I'm crazy?"

"Then who is to resuscitate her? I'm hardly a do-it-yourself type. Or did you plan to advertise?"

No way around that one. "I'll join you within the week."

"Then you get your initial payment within the week."

I tried to reason with him, but finally he said, "I can do without her if I must, but what can you do with her now?"

The man was a font of compelling argument.

"I'll come with you, but it's still cash."

"You won't need cash at my villa. You'll be my guest."

"Joseph, can we just once forego haggling?"

That night was a preview of hell. With no idea of the caliber of the South American dry cleaners, I packed only a few things, leaving me hours in which to think.

The tricky part would be in getting away from Joseph once I had the money. Then it occurred to me that if I left on the royal jet, avoiding reservations, tickets, airport lounges, I'd be harder to trace. The jet would have to refuel in southern Europe or northern Africa. That would be the time to lose Joseph.

In the morning, I called every mover in the area, but no one could pick up the Kryonikera before noon. Then I did new research on visa requirements and extradition treaties.

By the time I got to Porter's lab, I was riding on cold nerve and Valium. As I reached for the door, it opened.

She faced me like some embodiment of conscienc. Somehow, she got me to a chair. "Poor baby! Let me call a...."

I seized her arm. "I'm all right, Mom. What are you doing here?"

"Maurie, John hasn't been home since yesterday morning. I've been through hell since Billi called."

"Billi?"

"She expected her father and Emmy for dinner last night .... I know you're coming down with something."

I fumbled for my pillbox. "Billi's not going to make a fool of herself calling the police?"

"Everybody's calling the police. Her father missed an appointment with the Secretary of the Interior yesterday. Now Emmy doesn't answer her telephone, and I can't find John...."

"He's probably trying to reach you. You get home in case he calls, and I'll hold the fort here. Do you have cab fare?"

Fortunately, she did. So I sent my

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Mum off with a kiss and sat with little sister, waiting for the movers.

Joseph was testy when I arrived at the airport. "I don't know why you put everything off until the last minute. And you look ghastly."

"My cash?"

"On the plane."

"I should pick up some things at the airport shops, unless ... where will we refuel?"

"Lisbon."

"Ah. Well, I'm sure there'll be adequate shops there. Too bad it's not Algeria or Morocco. I have a weakness for Moroccan leather."

"Karam is not on good terms with Morocco."

"Could we board while they're still loading? I've had such a day."

Incredible luck. Portugal required no visa. I could shake Joseph in Lisbon and be on to Morocco. Morocco — no visa requirements, no extradition treaty with the United States, no relations with Karam!

Every soul aboard that jet was present to serve Joseph and me. After he presented me with a briefcase full of bills, he busied himself with telephones and secretaries while I was offered soft drinks, pillows, halvah, brocade slippers. Not long after we were airborne I drifted off, quite exhausted.

I woke when the wheels hit the runway. Joseph stood over me. "What are you on?"

"Just need some fresh air, few things at the airport..." As I tried to stand, he shoved me back in my seat.

I struck his hand away. In a second, three hulking guards were on me. While they held me, he searched me and my bags. Once we were aloft, he handed a steward every capsule, every tablet, even my antihistamines, and nodded toward the bathroom.

"Come," he said to me.

I followed him to the cargo hold. Among all the casks and cartons, the Kryonikera was barely visible.

Prying open a barrel, Joseph pulled out a crystal lamp in a shower of Styrofoam packing beads. Plunging his arm into the container again, he drew out a bottle of cognac. He drank, replaced the lamp and bottle, and lit a cigarette.

"Joseph!" I rasped. "That packing burns like tinder."

He gestured with the cigarette. "I bought some wonderful things in your country. If you damaged the least of them, I'd have your hand for it. And she is, to me, the only real treasure. If you should make any mistake in restoring her...."

I tried to smile. "That could leave us both short-handed."

"Only if you err. And then not your hands."

We returned to the passenger cabin. Salmon, capon, truffles, trifles, candles, orange soda in crystal goblets had been set out on damask. The quintessential voluptuary, Joseph became expansive as he gratified his appetite. He talked at length about his child-

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hood, his loneliness, urged me to eat, pressed a cigar on me.

I glanced away from the lighter flame, the guttering candles. "What are the lights below?"

"Amman."

"Jordan already? I'll go back and check on the unit."

"You're quite...."

"Sharp as a scimitar, Joseph."

In the hold, I dug out his cognac. The Jordanians could hardly demand a visa from one who dropped by inadvertently and left at once. I pried open the nearest containers. Computers, colognes, enough erotic curiosities to stock a porn shop, more brandies. I poured the flammable liquids over the packing. As I backed toward the door, I laid a thread of cognac and left my cigar burning at the end of it.

When I returned to the passenger cabin, Joseph was immersed in a copy of *Strength and Health*.

I waited. Waited. Could the cigar somehow have become extinguished?

Still, I was not prepared for the intensity of the panic. Among the screams, alarms, Joseph ran toward the flight cabin.

I stumbled after him. "Don't let them open the cargo door! That smoke is lethal!"

As he conferred with the pilot, I clutched at him. 'We have to turn back to Amman!"

He shrugged off my hand. "We're closer to Karam."

"Already?" I felt the heat, heard the flames. "We've got to set down!"

"We'd have no chance over the desert. The pilot will try for Karam."

I was dragged back to my seat, screaming.

Not until we scrambled from the blazing craft did Joseph cry out, shouting to the firefighters that they must save Emmaline.

Who would have taken him for a romantic?

My room was clean, the grille at my window as unyielding as the guard outside my door.

At the third dawn, I woke, the hair at my nape stirring.

Lovely, pale, austere.... "I thawed," she said simply.

I was revived. The Emir, beside her, gazed down on me. "How insignificant an object," he murmured, "may be the agent of surpassing wonders."

My sister seemed ... ah, strange, smoldering with an eerie brilliance. He did not touch her. He did not need to. What was between them was near palpable, terrifying in its intensity. As she swayed almost imperceptibly toward him, he shuddered.

When I was permitted visitors again, Joseph told me she had left Karam.

"And left the Emir desolated," he whispered. "But what man can hope to hold whatever she has become? He collects pictures of her from newspapers, magazines — always she is with people of great seriousness, great import." He closed his eyes. "I would give my life

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for one moment of what he must have known with her."

Life. "Considering the Emir has abolished slavery in Karam, how does he define our condition?" I often ask.

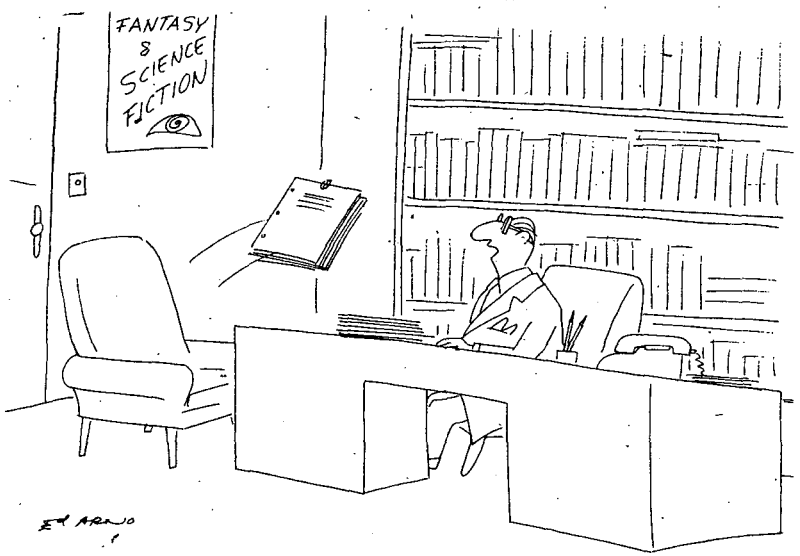
"Be grateful no one aboard that plane was damaged," Joseph reminds me. "That he permits us to exist is a miracle."

We are permitted to exist on condition I reproduce whatever it was happened to Emmaline. *But where is the key?* The precise intensity and duration of heat, or something else in that cargo hold? The potion she drank, something peculiar in her make-up, or some variable I've never considered?

The Emir supplies me with all the scientific journals I request. I dare not ask for a proper assistant. One who understands concepts like alternating current would spot my ignorance at once. Still, this fawning obsequiousness of Joseph's is unnerving. It is not his place to sugar my tea, cool my rice.

Certainly, I need someone younger, fitter, for a test subject. Joseph's willingness should not be a factor.

And if I am doomed to succeed, how will I cope with him thawed?



"We don't usually accept ghost-written works."

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Brian Aldiss's contribution to this special issue is a fine addition to the superior fiction he has published in F&SF since 1958: stories such as "Poor Little Warrior" (1958), "Hothouse" (1961), "The Saliva Tree" (1965) and "Enemies of the System" (1978). His most recent novel is HELLICONIA SPRING (Atheneum), which is a number one best-seller in England.

Door Slams In Fourth World

BY

BRIAN W. ALDISS

They flew to Frankfurt by the July plane.

Officials in green dungarees filled the airport, far outnumbering travelers. The officials were German and Chinese, and seemed completely uninterested in the three visitors, or in their baggage, their passports, their antanthrax certificates. They stood almost unmoving as the visitors shuffled by. The heat sealed off the world of action behind plate glass.

"No air conditioning. I warned you," Hemingway said triumphantly to his two companions. "It's gonna be rough!"

The hectares of car park were deserted. Their yellow directional signs, printed on the asphalt in orthogonal lettering, were ideographs of an extinct culture.

". . . 'All the pomp of yesterday is one with Niveveh and Ur,' " quoted Mirbar Azurianan, with relish. This desolation they had journeyed all the way from Detroit to see. There was some rebuilding going on, but no workmen moved among the scaffolding.

Mirbar Azurianan was large, burly, bearded like his Armenian ancestors, and, in his early thirties, already running to fat. Under his loosely flapping shirt, his stomach swung before him, imitating the movements of the pack dangling over one shoulder. He wore a large leather hat, considered suitable for travel in the Fourth World. Beneath its brim, his heavy young face was pasty. His blue eyes darted nervously across the European distances.

Azurianan's size and presence proclaimed him the most important personage of the three-person company. Jeremy Hemingway and his silent wife, Peggy, walked behind him, like mere

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appendages. They looked at him more often than he glanced at them.

They came to a kiosk labeled INFORMATION. A Chinese attendant directed them to a cab rank. Obediently, they traversed hot tarmac to where a thin line of people stood, emitting the squarking noise common to tourists visiting less favored parts of the world.

Battered BMWs with biogas envelopes lashed to their roofs drew up and bore the travelers away. Azurianan and the Hemingways climbed into a vehicle with a German driver. He stowed their luggage in the boot. Beside the steering wheel on the dash was his photograph, with a notice assuring passengers in the four international languages that he was a morally irreproachable person.

Soon they were rolling through a complex of feed roads and major routes which had hardly been repaired since the day the twentieth century died, back in the nineteen-eighties. The pattern of autobahns held no more meaning than the autobahns overhead, where zeepees rode the energy zone above Earth.

"Well, here's what we paid for — local color. They sure got local color here," Hemingway said, gazing out at the drained landscape. Hemingway was making one of his attempts to be expansive, slapping his knee as he spoke. His wife said nothing. She sat limply under her pale linen hat, under her pale linen suit, staring at nothing.

"Wie viele kilometer nach Würzburg?" Azurianan asked the driver.

"Nur ein hundert."

"What did you say?" Hemingway asked the psychoanalyst.

Must you deliver yourself up to him continually, in every small detail? Could you not have guessed that hundert *meant* hundred *— or else held your tongue? The simplest remark you make betrays the kind of jerk you are.*

Hemingway spent most of the slow journey flicking through his guide book, announcing all the sights they might visit in Würzburg. The two that particularly excited him — as he had informed them on the airship over — were Cologne cathedral and Milan railway station.

"The Chinese are doing a fantastic job on rehabilitating Europe. They're short on materials, they're short on energy, they're short on just about everything, and how do they manage it? Why, the way they always got by in the past — by teamwork. Teamwork, yeah. They're a great nation, a great nation, and I hand it to them. A great nation, no doubt about that. Eh, Mirbar?"

"They're a great nation," Azurianan said.

Not one hundred percent satisfied with this level of response, Hemingway turned to his wife.

"They're a great nation, don't you think, Peggy? The way they came right into the Fourth World when everyone else was scared off by anthrax, right?"

"Mmm."

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"You still got your headache?" He wrinkled his eyes to look better at her.

"It's on the mend." She turned her dark and heavily lashed eyes to stare out of the window.

"That's good. We're really on vacation now, really — on — vacation. Yeah, no shirking now." He laughed, did a little swagger with head and shoulders. "Got to go through with it now."

She did not laugh, though a ghost of a smile was conjured about her lips. Azurianan looked at her, grinning sympathetically. "We'll get you a drink and one of your pills as soon as we're in the hotel, Peggy, don't worry."

"I'll be okay, thanks. Just don't bug me."

You will never possess me as you possess Hem. I know that at the back of all this is your desire to possess me utterly — no, not for my sake, but merely in order to destroy Hem more entirely. I know that you cannot be deflected, and that your desires rule your world like lines of latitude. But my fear is at least equal to your obsessions, thank God.

He leaned forward and clutched her narrow waist, saying, "Sure you'll be okay. I'll see to that. And don't let Jeremy get you down. He's just excited, and that's absolutely right and proper. Fourth World's big stuff."

A pulse throbbed under her zygomatic arch.

A number of barriers were staggered across the road as they entered Würzburg. The BMW trailed behind ancient trucks loaded with hay. Smoke lay heavy ahead, tinting the sunlight with lead. They stopped at several guard posts while their papers were examined. Würzburg was more difficult to get into than Europe. Each German soldier was doubled by a Chinese; the Germans looked amateurish and unsmart, the Chinese correct, unflustered. Ahead, they glimpsed the Arc de Triumph, still unfinished.

"We're here," Hemingway said, and he read off a large notice, lettered in the four international languages, Chinese, Arabic, German and English, " 'Welcome to Premier Tourist Center of Fourth World. Welcome to Würzburg, the Home of the Equator of the White Sausage'. Now what do you imagine that happens to mean, eh?"

A smiling young Chinese stuck his face though the open window of the automobile and said, "You have been allocated to the Hotel of Fourth World Peoples, nearby to the Residenz. We hope you will have a happy vacation there." He handed the driver a docket.

Hemingway began to search in his Fodor for the hotel. He read off a list of symbols to the others. "No pets. Telephone. Bar. Goldfish pond. *Goldfish pond!* Swim Pool. Sun Lounge. No Nudity. I've heard it said they're pretty puritanical in China and the Fourth World. I guess a bit of sex is allowed in the bedrooms." He laughed and nudged his wife. "Vacation, eh, Peggy! I guess a bit of sex is allowed

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in the bedrooms."

"What does it say in your guide book on the subject?"

No Nudity meant she would be spared the sight of Mirbar Azurianan naked, lying luxuriously, his smooth brown body with its heavy belly and dark penis trailing, the yellowy soles of his feet. He was a man who stripped naked whenever conditions permitted; one of his basic assumptions in life was that nobody could mind anything he did. If they did mind, then it was time their particular phobia was examined fairly rigorously.

The Hotel of Fourth World Peoples was a two-story building practical and inelegant, built in front of the Residenz in what had once been a coach park. Two Chinese army lorries were parked there. Nobody was about. Inside the building, it was similarly deserted. It seemed that no one else was delegated to visit the hotel at present. Carp turned lazily in a concrete pond set in the floor perilously near the reception desk.

A woman clerk with short hair came and registered them. She had a way of looking at their mouths instead of their eyes when speaking. Her own mouth was crushed against her face, as if distorted by social pressures.

After the hectic traffics and tartan wallpapers of Detroit's hotels, the Würzburg hotel was like a dried gourd, its walls badly distempered, its carpets thin, its perspectives tinny. There were no potted plants.

As if she read their minds, the crushed woman said, when locking their doors, "We hope you will be happy here, and apologize if conditions in the Fourth World are not as you are accustomed at home."

"It'll be all right," Peggy Hemingway said, smiling at her. The smile she received back was perfunctory.

Hemingway ran right in and checked the toilet and shower, to see if water flowed. His wife stood in the middle of the room; she removed her hat and let her rich dark hair escape. He bumped into her as he emerged from the bathroom, laughing.

"Grab a look at the plumbing . . . . Place sure has *character*!"

"I was thinking how little character . . . ."

"You know what I mean."

As he tried out the bed, she moved over to the window, pushed it open and stepped onto a shallow balcony. Below lay a paved area, trapped between three sides of the hotel and, in the middle of the paved area, a swimming pool. Three women and a man lay as if dead by the side of the pool. The water was almost without ripple. Down its length, it reflected a cable which ran overhead, making it resemble a big, enigmatic parcel, treacherously wrapped in gangrene-colored foil.

A man passed on the far side of the pool, walking briskly, ignoring the recumbent forms, and went into the hotel. He glanced up at Peggy Heming-

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way as he went, one expert appraising glance, taking her in from eyebrows to ankles. He was dark, sharp-faced. His suit was light and as uncrumpled as the surface of the pool. Something in his stride set him apart from anyone else in the hotel. She was immediately curious about him.

He's an interloper, too. He doesn't belong . . . . We none of us belong, to be honest, but at least I realise that. There is nowhere I belong, even within myself. Perhaps it'll be easier for me here in the Fourth World than anywhere; the disaster has happened, and pretending otherwise can't be managed . . . . If only it wasn't for Hem, making an obscenity over testing out — pretending to test out — pretending to be enjoying testing out — the bed ... Why this constant pretense? Was it originally his fault or mine?

"Go and look see how Mirbar is making out, Hem," she said. "I'll check the natives aren't stealing our baggage."

Both her sentences were designed to evoke a needed response from him. As he marched down the ocher corridor whistling "Hail to the Chief," she whispered downstairs like a ghost. The reception hall was empty. Viewing it again as she descended the last steps, she saw its ugliness. An electrician knelt in a corner by the desk, trying to prize up marble tiles with a screwdriver.

The man she had observed in the pool area was standing looking at a small exhibition beside a drinks bar. The bar was closed. The man stood with his arms folded judiciously regarding the objects on the wall. She got the impression of someone poised for flight. He was conspicuously neat and cool.

Anxious lest he disappear, she went straight over to him and said the first thing that came into her head. "Are you the manager?"

He turned to scrutinize her. She saw she was recognized. The girl on the balcony. Her mistake had been to take his rapid walk for that of an outgoing man. This stranger was deeply sorrowful; the lean planes of his face were so set in melancholy that she was shocked into losing her own smile.

"I'm not the manager, no. You might think I was one of the mismanagers." He spoke in a light, accented English, gesturing as he did so at the exhibition on the wall.

She did not understand. Her casual glance at what he indicated became a stare. The exhibition, mounted near the bar so that none could miss it, was entitled

ISLAMIC ATROCITIES

In photographs and crudely blown-up newsprint, it showed a few details of the Islamic strike against Israel and Europe, the present Fourth World. Most of the stills of dead cities — Rome, Bonn, Strasburg, Amsterdam — were familiar to her, as were the pictures of dead animals. The centerpiece of the exhibit was a mummified corpse

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of an eight-year-old child. It was at this that Peggy fixed her gaze. The child was parceled in glass. It still wore some shreds of clothes. Its toes were curled up in an agony which death had frozen rather than releasing.

Oh, Rachel, Rachel, it was so sudden. I'll never forgive myself about Patricia, never, never, that I swear — or Hem either, the bastard . . . It was all so sudden, the way they struck. They'd learnt from us, from the Israelis. First bombs, then chemicals, then random anthrax strikes . . . . When are we ever going to break these endless cycles of retribution . . . .

Only when he turned as if dismissed did she recall there was some shadow in which she still felt need for human contact.

"I didn't understand your meaning."

"It's my improper speech of English. Excuse me." He bent the full melancholy force of his attention on her. "I know we must not expect justice, but I am sad for this heading where we read, 'Islamic Atrocities.' It was not all of the Islamic World that brought destruction to the Fourth World." When she still looked blank, he said, "Madam, forgive me, I speak without heed because I am troubled all the while here. I am a Saudi. From Saudi-Arabia, you know? Our kingdom always stood out against the European jihad."

"It was the effect of this dead child ...."

"Although I am not the manager, we might use his office, if you care to sit down and talk. Come along, please."

She walked beside him, trying to deal with the shadows of the past and those of the present. He exuded a faint aroma of *eau de cologne*. She had never encountered an Arab before. Should she admit that she was born Israeli, and was American only by marriage? Why was she walking meekly with him, following him as for years she had followed Jeremy Hemingway?

Patricia, I swear I loved you — love you still. I just could not cope with so much grief. It's always with me . . . . And Hem, too, I guess . . .

In the office, empty of people and very nearly empty of furniture, she sat down. The Saudi brought her a glass and poured into it a measure of red wine. He poured himself a similar glass, raising it to his lips without tasting.

"Your health," she said automatically. His name, he told her, was Fahd al-Moghrabi. He was here on reconstruction work, advising the Chinese. He traveled all over the Fourth World, from conference to conference. His profession, he said with a smile, was really communication.

If only someone invented a way of true communication between humans . . . . Since I failed you, dear child, I am stricken silent. What can I possibly do, except give myself to him?

Looking searchingly at her, al-

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Moghrabi said, "Saudi-Arabia does advise the Chinese continually, and give them financial aid. We mediate between them and the rest of the Arab world. You may have observed that the new airport at Frankfurt, although it appears in material aspect a traditional Communist Chinese construction, faces towards Mecca and has a religious environment for the convenience of pilgrims."

"We only just got here."

"You are with a party?"

"Yes."

"But otherwise you are on your own?"

"...Yes."

"That is a disgrace for such a beautiful lady." The sad sensuous eyes regarded her, as much in sympathy as calculation. "Would you do me the honor of dining with me this evening? I don't mean here, in this hotel. I will drive you somewhere tolerable."

"I'd like that. My name. You don't even know my name. My name is Peggy Schmidt."

"Schmidt? But you are American, isn't it?"

"Yes."

There could just be a time for confessions this evening, feller, if you play your cards right. I could do with a good cry. And a good screw. Thank God he doesn't drink — that's a promising sign, it really is.

They spend the afternoon doing the sights. Smoke hung heavily over the city. The Chinese nourished a belief that smoke warded off an untoward effects — exactly what effects was never specified. They were shown some of the old sights and some of the new.

The Residenz had escaped destruction and was a great attraction. Here, several dozen tourists walked up Neumann's great staircase and gazed at the whitewashed walls and ceilings. The new government had painted out Tiepolo's murals; their frivolity was not in keeping with the times. The oppressive austerities of Peking and the Koran met where once Beatrice had been sportively conducted by the gods to Barbarossa's side. The delicacies of the Holy Roman Empire were extinguished by an army of crude brushstrokes. Jeremy Hemingway read the details from his guide.

He laughed. "Well, that's what history's all about."

They comforted themselves by purchasing with hard currency mango ice creams from a stall in the chapel. The men bought jolly paper hats saying I LOVE THE FOURTH WORLD. Peggy refused to wear one, and held on to her pale linen hat while the men capered tauntingly before her.

The great baroque church of Melk had been reconstructed at a point overlooking the river. They visited it, as well as a rather half-hearted attempt at the Lascaux caves, also destroyed in the early nuke attacks; the replica had been improvized in a series of old cellars. Rather better — three stars in

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Fodor — was von Erlach's Schönbrunn, authentic in every detail outside, a shell within.

Exhausted but uplifted, the three sat in the coach that took them back to the hotel.

"Hand it to the Chinese, they're going to have one of the best tourist centers in the world, time they're finished," Azurianan said. "What do you say, Peggy?"

"It's a privilege, no less, to be among the first to see what they're planning," Hemingway said. He had been holographing all afternoon, and his face shone beneath the white paper hat. "They sure know how to lay out the money, I hand them that."

"The Saudis have invested heavily in the reconstruction program," Peggy said. "Islam is richer than China."

"Islam, Islam, that's all we hear about in the States nowadays," Hemingway said. "Give me the good old days of US-USSR confrontation. That I could understand. Anyhow, what you know about the Saudis, Peg?"

"Are the zeepees also contributing to the reconstruction program?" she asked him in return.

Azurianan laughed. "Those lazy sons of bitches up in the zodiacal planets? What do they care what goes on on Earth? My brother went up there fifteen years ago, made a packet out of alternative environment facilities, and once is precisely, but precisely, how many times I heard from him all that while."

"Do you write to him?" Peggy asked.

"Too damn right I don't." He and Hemingway laughed. He snapped his fingers. "They figure things out in different ways up there. Earth isn't good enough for them up there."

They began talking over plans for the rest of the day, and were still discussing when the coach arrived at the Fourth World Peoples' Hotel. The general idea was to have a few drinks, use the pool to cool off and sober up, eat dinner, go to the movie the hotel was showing, and then seek out whatever night-life Würzburg had to offer before the midnight curfew.

"How's that sound to you, honey?" Hemingway asked, clutching his wife's arm. "Know what, you need a few martinis to give you a lift, right, Mirbar? We can't have you moping all the vacation, can we? Then we'll have a splash around in their pool. Then the evening can just sort of close in around us, all nice and gentle."

"Yes, Hem. But I have to see if I can turn up that item of baggage I'm missing." She had hidden a small grip in a cupboard in the manager's office. It gave her an excuse to leave her husband's side when al-Moghrabi arrived to collect her in his car.

Hemingway paused, detaining her in the foyer as Azurianan trudged ahead with his heavy panther walk. He looked anxiously at her.

"Peggy — you're not brooding, are you? We're here to have fun, hon.

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That's why we quit the States for two weeks, remember. Just don't be so uptight, just for once. I'm asking now."

She looked at him coldly, at his hangdog expression, his air of pleading, his pathetic hat, lowering her head so that her velvet eyes regarded him under the white linen brim.

"Who's uptight? Will you relax and quit bugging me, Hem? Have you seen this goddamn exhibition they have here of Islamic atrocities? A fine way to greet visitors!"

"Yeah, well, come on, Peggy, I took a look at it, but what the hell .... I mean, what am I supposed to do about it? Just don't look at it. I mean, we know it all happened, right, but it's all over and done with, eight years and more ago."

"Hem, have you gotten so insensitive that that mummified kid doesn't remind you of Patricia? Have you gotten that fucking insensitive?"

He looked anxiously about him. She was raising her voice.

"No, that mummified kid did not remind me of Patricia. I refuse to be reminded of Patricia, particularly when I am on vacation abroad with my wife."

"Yeah, with your wife and your shrink."

"My shrink does not remind me of Patricia either, Peg, and you'd best take the same line. We can't remedy what happened in the past, any more than the Germans can. Now, snap out of it, and let's see if we can't rustle up some alcohol, damn it."

"I don't aim to get smashed with you and have you tongue me all over, if that's what you're hoping."

He showed his teeth and, with a sudden anger, bunched a fist under her lip. "I long ago ceased hoping anything with you. Now, get back in line, will you?"

"Oh god, Hem, why is life so awful? Why do we have to go on living like this? Can't you do something?"

"I did something. I brought you to this motherfucking city. So enjoy, woman, enjoy."

Fahd al-Moghrabi's room had an austerity she liked, an austerity that spoke of wealth, not poverty. Mysterious music, tuned low, filled its tiled space. The lights were well-placed. An enormous cactus flowered in a pot, its blooms like rosy shark's teeth. The one incongruous note, she thought, was a calendar showing a carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Al-Moghrabi explained that his bank enjoyed considerable trade with Brazil. "His bank." Peggy noted that.

She had not cried, though she still considered the possibility. Instead, she played the mother role. He had been unexpectedly shy, resisting her desire to scrutinize his body. He had giggled and looked vexed. Then, covering himself with the sheet, he had lectured her on money.

In the middle of a lecture on how

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many million rials Saudi-Arabia was investing in the Chinese reconstruction of the Fourth World — to the public disgust of many Arab fellow-nations — she had put forth a tentative hand, to find him clutching a strong erection. From then on, he had proved himself an enthusiastic lover.

His hotel was in a part of town where other foreigners did not go. Even Germans were not allowed here — only Chinese and their business partners, Arabs, Russians, Brazilians, South Africans. Al-Moghrabi hated the Chinese. He seemed to hate most races. He hated Europeans, he hated Americans. He hated blacks, as the Chinese did. He liked Chinese women. Chinese women were good in bed.

Peggy began to dislike his arrogance. To her obvious question, he answered frankly, yes, they were better in bed than she was. No, not more abandoned. More skilled. Saudis preferred skill in their women.

As she sat undecided on the edge of the bed, he ran a finger up the range of her vertebrae and told her a complicated story about Arab temperament and pride, and a girl of sixteen he knew in Riyadh, and the prodigies she had performed on the living and the dying. Peggy Hemingway was torn between the wish to believe his story and the wish not to. She was also realizing that she would soon have to disentangle herself from this man. So often in the past it had proved unexpectedly difficult to disentangle herself from a mere stranger. Then she would have to lie to Hem, maybe for days, until he dropped the subject.

Tension built up inside her. She knew the feeling well. It was almost like letting blood collect in the mouth. Sooner or later, you were forced to spit.

"How old did you say this little whore was?"

Fatima is sixteen years."

"Patricia is sixteen, Patricia, worth a hundred Fatimas. Patricia — Patricia, my niece." She turned on him savagely. "She's locked up, you know that, certified insane, behavioral problems, severe emotional instability?"

He lay defenseless, no longer shy about his nakedness. "One may be in prison and still have freedom of mind."

"Freedom of mind? Patricia has no mind. She lives out her days in a slammer. No one can get through to her any more. And you know what? You did it, you are responsible."

I have no privilege to meet you or your interesting family before this day," he protested.

She stood naked before him, face livid. It was blood-spitting time.

"Oh, you can mock me. You don't feel, do you? Directly I saw you by the pool, I knew you had no feeling. Why do I always seek out men without feelings?"

To make him feel, she told him about Patricia.

Peggy and Rachel Schmidt were sisters. They were born and grew up in Is-

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rael. Rachel was the older of the two. She had married into a wealthy family; her husband was some years her senior, a scholar at Tel Aviv University who achieved international acclaim for his recreation of ancient music and musical instruments of the Middle East. He had friends even in Cairo and was a frequent visitor to the States. Rachel bore him a daughter, Patricia, on whom both parents doted.

Rachel worked in Jerusalem, managing the head offices of a travel agency owned by her husband's family. Peggy was working in one of the agency's branches when she encountered Jeremy Hemingway. He was young, amusing, diffident, virginal, and she had never met an American before. He worked for a petrochemical firm in Detroit. The name Detroit was magic to Peggy. She seduced him in Eilat, and a week later — amid storms of protest from her family — was flying back to the States with him.

Just in time, as it transpired.

Israel aggro. Libyan paranoia. Palestinian obsessions. The Pakistani bomb. The sequence of events had been long forseen. The Islamic Strike hit six days after Jeremy and Peggy were married. Rachel had fallen ill at the last moment and lay in a hotel in Tel Aviv while the wedding took place in Detroit. Her daughter had been sent over to act as bridesmaid.

The grief of that eight-year-old kid! You'd never think an eight-year-old could contain so much grief. An adult, okay — a kid, no. Christ, how she howled when she heard that Israel had been wiped off the slate just like that. There was no one for her to go back to, no place. Jeremy and I were still on honeymoon. Patricia was seeing the States with his sister. We hurried back. I tried to comfort her. He tried to comfort her. Yes, he really did, poor ineffectual bastard, he really tried to comfort Patricia. We'd never seen grief like that. It frightened us. It frightened the shit out of us. It really frightened the shit out of us. We didn't love each other like that. We didn't love anyone the way she loved Rachel.

You couldn't grasp the kid. She was all sort of elbows and knees and flailing limbs. You couldn't get near her to wash her or mop her snotty face. Like trying to get near a windmill, that's what it was like. A windmill in a storm ....

The grief. It just went on. Old Hebrew grief out of a well. It ate us up. She struck at us when we tried to comfort her. No substitutes for Patricia. Not like me. Hem hit her first. He hit back. I was glad when he did it. Jesus, I'll never forget that evening. Maybe she had already fucked our lives up. She attacked him and he hit her right in the mouth. Maybe he was scared.

"You goddamned slut, suffer in silence like the rest of us." That was what he said. I went wild. I hit him. Then Patricia got her breath and started screaming real bad. I hit her. The pleasure of it. I followed it up,

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too. I hated that selfish miserable mourning windmill of bones, I wanted to kill her. I wished she'd been wiped out along with her parents, her country.

She crawled back to her room, all bloody.

Hem and I got slammed that night. Neat gin. I never touch the poison, but that night it so happened it was neat gin. Bottle after bottle. I guess the hating really began then. We couldn't speak to each other. We hated each other. I hated myself — I hate myself more than I hate him.

We had to call the doctor to Patricia. We got her committed.

I still go and see her once a month. Conscience visits. She doesn't recognize me. Sixteen. Still waiting for her mother to come back. Still pissing the bed every night.

"I'll drive you home, Peggy," Fahd al-Moghrabi said. He kissed her lightly on the lips.

Punctuating the night, the fake buildings flashed by. The fake Arc de Triumph, the fake Schönbrunn, the fake Escorial, the fake Coliseum, the fake Milan railway station, the fake this, the fake that, huddling close as if space had puckered in some unexpected cosmic contraction.

Once they passed a long line of Chinese, four abreast, marching along the road in their green dungarees. Al-Moghrabi spat out of the car window. Smoke hung everywhere, shifty as a cat. Curfew was a few minutes away.

He kissed her farewell at the door of the Hotel of the Fourth World Peoples. She was frightened by his correctness, fancying it grew like a tumor from some deep inexpressible anger; or was she, as Azurianan would say, projecting?

'You hate me. I gave you only ashes."

"You gave me all you had to give," he said. "How should I make a complaint of such a gift? This world makes us all suffer. Good night, Peggy." He walked briskly back to the car.

She remembered to retrieve her concealed baggage from the office. She staggered as if tipsy among the sharp reflecting surfaces of the reception area. The encounter was over; once more, she had missed something hoped for.

The hotel was airless. Peggy thought she heard someone moving in the dark, but saw no one. In skirting the ornamental fish pond, she kicked something. It rolled over the tiles. A tool — a screwdriver. It tinkled down among the fish. After a pause she moved to the side entrance, trying to breathe the air. It was stale, flat with a taint of smoke.

The pool lay shimmering under its cellophane surface. She listened to catch the sound of al-Moghrabi's car, chugging beneath its biogas envelope, but it was gone. There was no sound. No sound from countryside or town. The whole of Europe was now as silent

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as China itself after dark. DOOR SLAMS IN FOURTH WORLD could have made a shock headline, if newspapers still existed.

Above the patchy walls of the hotel loomed the skeleton of the fake Eiffel Tower.

The deserted pool reminded her of a painting by David Hockney hanging in the penthouse back home in Detroit. A present from Hem's parents. If she ever got back to that damned First World, she'd sell that painting. Reminders of grief and silence people didn't need.

Did Fahd care anything for her? Was she just one more — unsatisfactory — woman for him, as he was just one more man for her? Was it possible for real — real genuine — contact to exist between two people? Hem, you bastard, thank god you've failed me as much as I fail you ....

Despite the dead warmth of the night, a shivering fit overcame her. She turned, and immediately a hand was clamped about her mouth. Immediately she was terrified of death, although only a moment earlier the idea had wooed her from the shadows of her mind.

"You're back, then. I gave your husband a grammy and he's asleep. Don't scream." Words hot in her ear.

When he saw she would not scream, he removed his paw. Abstractedly, she thought, in all hotels I've ever been it, even in the Fourth World, there's always enough light about to see who is attacking you.

"Where've you been this time?" Azurianan asked.

She looked into his vague Armenian eyes. He was no more frightening now than when being consolatory. She laughed, pretending drunkeness,

"Where've you been, you bitch?" He shook her.

"I'm going to bed, Mirbar, thanks so much. I just may take a grammy myself, okay. I've had the bother of going all the way back to the airport to check out this hunk of missing baggage."

She swung the grip forward and hit him in the chest with it.

Totally unconvinced, he said, "I'll see you upstairs."

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"I'm not drunk, as you are."

"I'm never drunk."

"More's the fucking pity."

She heard shots distantly. Who were they shooting? Germans? Tourists? Each other? She staggered as she advanced towards the stairwell as it drunkeness were truth. The wall was rough under her steadying palm.

Outside his door, she said, "By the way, Mirbar, *darling*, I am going to fix it, if it's the last thing I do, that Hem gives you the push. I can't take you getting between us any longer. We might have a chance again if you weren't around. From this day forth, Hem is going to have to do without his lousy shrink."

His face was against hers. She could feel the sagging young belly pressing against her grip, smell spice on his breath, as if he were stuffed with dead sweet things.

He said, "Peggy, I'm not Jeremy's shrink. I'm yours. He pays me to see after you."

Her anger came back. She hit him across his cheek, feeling his bones and teeth unyielding under her yielding palm.

"Lies, lies, you liar! Get out of here! Get lost!"

He grasped her and flung his door open. "Come in here, you neurotic little whore, I'll teach you a thing or two. I'll show you something that won't shrink. Maybe I'll fuck a little sanity into you tonight."

He was unzipping his flies. She broke from him and ran for her room, slamming the door behind her and shooting the bolt into place.

Azurianan whispered her name once from the corridor, and then no more. She stood where she was, listening. There was no further sound.

Hemingway had not roused. His heavy breathing was disturbed; then it became more regular. On the ceiling of the room, light rippled, reflected from the surface of the pool outside. That stifling silence again.

She stood for a long time, her back to the door. Then she flung off her soiled clothes and climbed into bed beside her husband.

There was more shooting outside before dawn. Neither of the Americans heard it.

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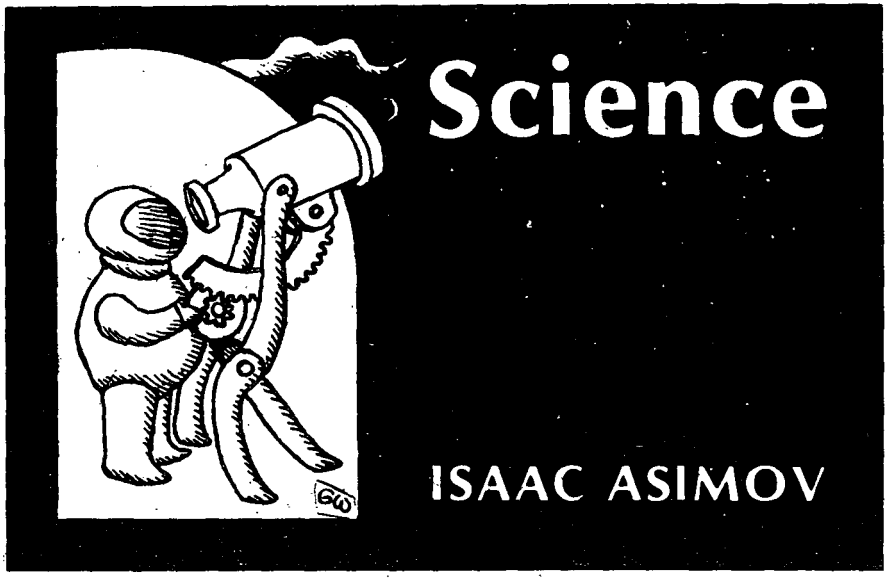

BREAD AND STONE

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus assured his listeners that God the Father would be kind to humanity. He demonstrated that by pointing out that human fathers, vastly imperfect by comparison, were kind to *their* children. He said:

"...what man is there of you whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?" (Matthew 7:9).

A bitter echo of this verse was heard eighteen centuries later in connection with Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet, who lived and died in grinding poverty, even while he was turning out his now world-famous lyrics.

After his death in 1796, at the age of 37, the Scots discovered that he was a great poet (it is always easier to honor someone after it is no longer necessary to support him) and decided to erect a monument to him. This was told to Burn's aging mother, who received the news with less than overwhelming gratitude.

"Rabbie, Rabbie," she was reported to have said, "Ye asked for bread, and they gave ye a stone."

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I love the story and it brings a tear to my eye every time I tell it, but like all the historical stories I love, it may be apocryphal.

The English satirist Samuel Butler, best known for his poem "Hudibras," died in dire want in 1680, and, in 1721, Samuel Wesley, after noting Butler's monument in Westminster Abbey, wrote:

"A poet's fate is here in emblem shown:

"He asked for Bread, and he received a Stone."

It's unlikely that Mrs. Burns, three-quarters of a century later, was quoting Wesley, but it seems to me likely that whoever reported Mrs. Burn's remark was really quoting.

In any case, bread is the product of the carbon atom, and stone is the product of the silicon atom. And though carbon and silicon are similar in atomic structure, their products are so different that they form a natural and powerful antithesis.

I ended last month's essay by comparing carbon dioxide and silicon dioxide; the former turning into a gas at so low a temperature that it remains a gas even in the extremest wintry weather of Antarctica; the other turning into a gas at so high a temperature that even the hottest volcanoes don't produce any significant quantities of silicon dioxide vapors.

In the molecule of carbon dioxide, each carbon atom is combined with two oxygen atoms, thus: O=C=O. The carbon atom (C) is attached to each oxygen atom (O) by a "double bond"; that is, by two pairs of electrons. Each atom participating in such a double bond contributes one electron to each pair or two electrons altogether.The oxygen atom has only two electrons to contribute under normal circumstances; the carbon atom, four. The carbon atom, therefore, forms a double bond with each of two oxygen atoms, as shown in the formula.

The silicon atom (Si) is very similar to the carbon atom in its electron arrangements, and it, too, has four electrons to contribute to bond-formulation. It, too, can form a double bond with each of two oxygen atoms, and silicon dioxide can be represented as O=Si=O.

At the end of last month's essay, I pointed out that the bonds holding carbon and oxygen together are stronger than those holding silicon and oxygen together, and suggested this meant that carbon dioxide should have higher melting and boiling points than silicon dioxide has. The reverse is, in actual fact, true, and I posed this as a problem.

Actually, I was oversimplifying. There are indeed times when melting points and boiling points signify the breaking of strong bonds between

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atoms, so that the stronger the bonds the higher the melting and boiling points. This is true when each atom in a solid is held to its neighbors by strong bonds. There is then no way of converting the solid to, first, a liquid, and then a gas, except by breaking some or all of those bonds.

In other cases, however, two to a dozen atoms are held together strongly to form a discrete molecule of moderate size, and the individual molecules are bound to each other weakly. In that case, melting and boiling points are reached when those weak intermolecular bonds are broken, and the individual molecules are freed. In that case, the strong bonds within the molecule need not be touched, and the melting points and boiling points are then usually quite low.

In the case of a boiling point, in particular, we have a situation in which the intermolecular bonds are completely broken so that a gas is produced in which the individual molecules move about freely and independently. At a sublimation point, the intermolecular bonds in a solid are completely broken to form a gas which would be made up of completely independent molecules.

The boiling point of silicon dioxide is about 2300°C, while the sublimation point of carbon dioxide is — 78.5°C. Clearly, in heating silicon dioxide to a gas, we must break strong bonds between atoms; while in heating carbon dioxide to a gas, we need break only weak intermolecular bonds.

Why? The formulas, O=Si=O and O=C=O, look so similar.

To begin with, we must understand that a double bond is *weaker* than a single bond. This seems to go against common sense. Surely, a grip with both hands would be stronger than a grip with one hand only. Holding something with two rubber bands, two ropes, two chains would seem a stronger situation than with one only in each case.

Nevertheless, this is not so in the case of interatomic bonds. To explain that properly requires quantum mechanics, but I will do everyone a favor* by offering a more metaphoric explanation. We can imagine that there's only so much space between atoms, and that when four electrons crowd into the space to set up a double bond, they don't have enough room to establish a good grip. Two electrons, setting up a single bond, do better. Imagine yourself squeezing both hands into a constricted space, and holding on to something with thumb and forefinger of each hand. Inserting one hand and achieving a good all-fingers grip would be far more effective.

**Chiefly myself!*

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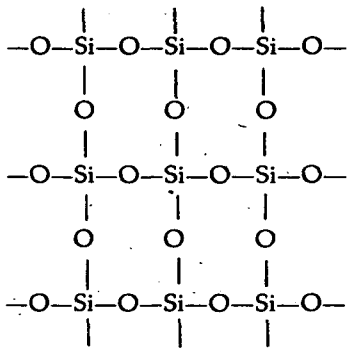
Consequently, if there is a chance to rearrange the electrons in silicon dioxide in such a way as to replace the double bonds by single bonds, the tendency will be for that to happen.

Where there are many silicon dioxide molecules present, for instance, each oxygen atom distributes its electrons so that it holds on to each of two different silicon atoms with a single bond apiece, rather than to one silicon atom with a double bond. Instead of O=Si=O, you have -O-Si-O-Si-O-Si- and so on, indefinitely, in either direction.

Each silicon atom has four electrons to contribute and can form four single bonds, but each uses only two single bonds in the chain just pictured. Each silicon atom, therefore, can start an indefinite chain in two other directions, so that you end up with—



This looks two-dimensional, but it isn't really. The four bonds of silicon are distributed toward the four apices of a tetrahedron, and the result is a three dimensional structure, rather like that in diamond or silicon carbide.

Consequently, each chunk of pure silicon dioxide ("quartz") is, in effect, an enormous molecule, in which there are, on the whole, two oxygen atoms for every silicon atom. To melt and boil such a chunk requires the breaking of the strong Si-O bonds, so that we have a high boiling point, and don't encounter gaseous silicon dioxide under Earth-surface conditions.

All this remains true if other types of atoms join the silicon-oxygen lattice in numbers that are not large enough to disrupt that lattice completely, thus forming "silicates." The silicates, generally, are high-melting and high-boiling.

The matter is quite different with carbon dioxide. Smaller atoms tend to form stronger bonds, so that the carbon atom, which is smaller than the sil-

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icon atom, bonds more strongly with oxygen than silicon does. In fact, even the C=O double bond, while weaker than the C=O single bond, is nevertheless sufficiently strong so that the tendency to distribute itself into single bonds is much smaller than in the case of silicon dioxide. There are certain advantages in stability of small molecules over large, and this, combined with the comparative strength of the carbon/oxygen double bond, tends to keep carbon dioxide in the form of small molecules.

If the temperature is low enough, the individual molecules of carbon dioxide cling together and form a solid, but the molecules are held together by relatively weak intermolecular bonds and these are easily broken. Hence, the low sublimation point.

Other atoms can combine with carbon dioxide to form "carbonates," and these remain solid at Earth-surface temperatures. If heated to higher temperatures, however, they break up and give off carbon dioxide gas at considerably lower temperatures than the boiling point of silicates.

Calcium carbonate ("limestone") will, for instance, give off carbon dioxide gas at about 825°C.

When a planetary system forms, the process of formation produces a hot planet to begin with. If the forming planets are comparatively near the central sun, the temperature rises still higher as a result.

Under those conditions, the only solids one can have are those which consist of atoms forming large atom-lattices and which therefore, have high melting and boiling points. This includes two varieties of substances that tend to separate as the planet develops: metals (chiefly iron, plus those metals that will mix with it relatively freely) and silicates.

The dense metals tend to collect at the center of the planet, with the lighter silicates surrounding that core as an outer shell.

This is the general structure of the five worlds of the inner solar system: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Moon, and Mars. (In the case of Mars and the Moon, the metallic component is quite low.)

Those elements whose atoms fit with difficulty, or not at all, into the metallic or silicate lattice, tend to be left over as individual atoms, as small molecules, or as lattices in which the atoms are but feebly held together. In all cases, they are low-melting ("volatile") and, in the early days of planetary formation, existed to a large extent as vapors.

Since the metals and silicates are made up of elements that, in turn, make up a relatively small fraction of the original materials out of which planetary systems form, the worlds of the inner solar system are com-

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paratively small and possess correspondingly weak gravitational fields — too weak to hold vapors.

This means the loss of most or all of some of the elements that are particularly common in the original preplanetary mixture: hydrogen, helium, carbon, nitrogen, neon, sodium, potassium, and argon.

Thus, Mercury and the Moon possess little or no hydrogen, carbon, and nitrogen, three elements without which life as we know it cannot exist. Venus and Earth are massive enough to have hung on to some of these elements, and each has a substantial atmosphere of volatiles. Mars, with a weaker gravitational field (it has only one-tenth the mass of Earth), was, because of its greater distance from the Sun, cool enough to hang on to a tiny quantity of volatile matter and has a thin atmosphere.

Beyond Mars, in the outer solar system, the planets remained cool enough to collect substantial proportions of those volatiles which made up 99 percent of the original mixture (chiefly hydrogen and helium), so that they grew large and massive. As they grew, their gravitational field intensified, and they were able to grow still more rapidly (the "snowball effect"). The results were the large outerplanets: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. These are the so-called "gas giants," made up chiefly of a mixture of hydrogen and helium, with small molecules containing carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen as substantial impurities, and with (it is presumed) relatively small cores of silicates and metals at the center.

Even the smaller worlds of the outer solar system became cool enough, at an early stage, to collect volatiles. The molecules of these contain carbon or nitrogen or oxygen, each in combination with hydrogen. At the present very low temperatures of these worlds, these volatiles are in the solid state. They are "ices," so called because of their general resemblance in properties to the best-known example here on Earth — frozen water.

The four large satellites of Jupiter, as an example, have undergone heating through Jupiter's tidal effect (which grows rapidly greater as the distance of the satellite is smaller). Ganymede and Callisto, the two farthest satellites, have undergone little heating and are essentially icy worlds, and larger than the other two. Io, the innermost, has been too warm to collect volatiles and is essentially silicate in nature, while Europa, which lies between Io and Ganymede, seems to be silicate, with an icy cover.

But let's get back to Earth, which consists of a liquid nickel-iron core, surrounded by a silicate mantle.

On the very surface are those volatiles that Earth has managed to keep. Hydrogen atoms are chiefly to be found as part of the water molecules that

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make up our (comparatively) vast ocean. Nitrogen atoms are to be found as two-atom molecules in the atmosphere. Carbon atoms are found as carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (in small quantities), as carbonates in the crust, and as elementary carbon in the form of coal deposits.

Earth is, however, depleted in these elements and, while they are present in sufficient quantity to allow a complete and diverse load of life, there are less of these elements on Earth by far than there is in an equal mass of matter more representative of the overall composition of the Universe (say, in an equal mass of Jupiter or the Sun).

But if the Earth's crust contains 370 silicon atoms for every carbon atom, and the two are so similar in many of their chemical properties, why should life form about the carbon atom rather than the silicon atom?

In this connection, we have to remember that life is a rather complex atomic dance. Life represents a relatively low-entropy system, maintained against an overwhelming tendency ("the second law of thermodynamics") to raise the entropy. Life is made up of very complex and fragile molecules that, left to themselves, would break down. It contains high concentrations of certain types of atoms or molecules in some places, low concentrations in others; where, left to themselves, the concentrations would promptly begin to even out — and so on.

In order to maintain the state of low entropy, the chemistry of life keeps up an unceasing activity. It is not that molecules don't break down or uneven concentrations don't even out; it is that the complex molecules are built up again as fast as they break down, and the concentrations made uneven as fast as they even out. It is as though we were keeping a house dry during a flood, not by stopping the flood (which we can't do) but by assiduously and tirelessly sweeping out the water as fast as it pours in.

This means that there must be a constant shuffling of atoms and molecules, and that the basic raw materials of life must exist in a form that enables them to be seized and used rapidly. The raw materials must exist as small molecules in considerable quantity under conditions that enable the bonds holding the atoms together within the molecules to be easily broken and re-formed, so that molecules of one type are forever being converted to another.

This is accomplished by use of a fluid medium in which the various molecules are dissolved. They are there present in high concentration, they move about freely, and they serve the purpose. The fluid medium used is water, which is plentiful on Earth, and which is a good solvent for a wide variety of substances. Life, in fact, is impossible without water.

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The molecules that are useful for life are those that are soluble in water, therefore, or that can be made soluble. Carbon dioxide, for instance, is fairly soluble in water. Oxygen is only slightly soluble, but it attaches readily to hemoglobin so that the small quantity that does dissolve is snatched up at once, leaving room for another small quantity to dissolve and so on.

The process of solution in water is, however, similar in some ways to the processes of melting and boiling. Interatomic or intermolecular bonds must be broken. If you have a whole lattice of atoms, the entire lattice will not enter solution as an intact mass. If the lattice can be pulled apart into smaller fragments, on the other hand, those fragments may be dissolved.

Silicates form a tightly bound lattice, and the bonds are as resistant to breakage by water as by heat. Silicates are "insoluble" — which is a good thing — or the oceans would dissolve much of the continental areas and produce a thick sludge, which would be neither sea nor land and in which life, as we know it, could not exist.

But this also means that silicon atoms do not exist in the form of small, soluble molecules and, consequently, are not incorporated into actively living tissue. Silicon therefore does not serve as the basis of life, and carbon does.

That, however, is under Earthly conditions. What about the other conditions?

A planet's chemical condition can be "oxidizing," or "reducing." In the former case, there is a preponderance of atoms that accept electrons, as would be the case with large quantities of free oxygen in the atmosphere. In the latter case, there is a preponderance of atoms that give up electrons, as would be the case with large quantities of free hydrogen present in the atmosphere. Earth has an oxidizing atmosphere, Jupiter, a reducing one. Originally, Earth may have had a reducing atmosphere, too.

In an oxidizing atmosphere, carbon tends to exist as carbon dioxide. In a reducing atmosphere, it tends to exist as methane, the molecule of which consists of a carbon atom to which four hydrogens are attached (CH_4). In the outer solar system, where reducing conditions are the rule, methane is extraordinarily common.

Methane is the parent of an endless number of other substances, for carbon atoms can easily attach to each other in chains or rings, with any spare bonds connected to hydrogen atoms. There are thus an enormous number of possible hydrocarbons, with molecules of various size made up of car-

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bon and hydrogen only. Methane ismerely the simplest of these

Add an occasional atom of oxygen, nitrogen, sulfur, or phosphorus) or combinations of these) to the basic hydrocarbon skeleton, and you have the vast number and variety of compounds found in living organisms ("organic compounds"). These are all, after a fashion, elaborations of methane.

In short, the chemicals of life are of the type one would expect to be formed under reducing conditions, and that is one of the reasons that chemists suspect that the early Earth, at the time life came into existence, had a reducing atmosphere or, at the very least, not an oxidizing one.

Silicates are, however, characteristic of an oxidizing environment. Might not silicon form other kinds of compounds under reducing conditions? Could not silicon, like carbon, combine with four hydrogen atoms?

The answer is: Yes. The compound SiH_4 does exist and is called "silane."

Methane has a boiling point of −161.6°C, and so under Earth-surface conditions, it is always a gas. Silane is quite similar in properties, with a boiling point of −112°C, so that it, too, is a gas. (The boiling point of silane is distinctly higher than that of methane, because its molecular weight is distinctly higher, 28 as compared to 16.)

Then, just as carbon can form chains with hydrogen taking up the spare bonds, so can silicon.

A two-carbon chain can add on six hydrogen atoms; a three-carbon chain, eight hydrogen atoms; and a four-carbon chain, ten hydrogen atoms. In other words, we can have C_2H_6, C_3H_8, and C_4H_{10}, which are called "ethane," "propane," and "butane," respectively. (Each name has a rationale behind it, but that's another story for another day.)

Similarly, we have Si_2H_6, Si_3H_8, and Si_4H_{10}, which are called "disilane," "trisilane," and "tetrasilane," respectively.

The carbon compounds have boiling points of −88.6°C, −44.5° C, and −0.5° C, respectively, so that all three are gases under Earth-surface conditions, though butane would be a liquid under ordinary winter conditions, and propane would be a liquid under polar conditions.

The silanes have appropriately higher boiling points. Disilane has a boiling point of −14.5°C, trisilane, one of 53° C, and tetrasilane, one of 109° C. Under Earth-surface conditions, disilane is a gas, while trisilane and tetrasilane are liquids.

* * *

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All this looks very hopeful, but there must be a catch, and there is. A single bond between carbon and oxygen has an energy content of 70 kilocalories per mole while the energy content of the bond between carbon and hydrogen is 87. There is a tendency for carbon to remain bonded to hyrdrogen, therefore, even in the presence of lots of oxygen. The hydrocarbons are quite stable under Earth-surface conditions.

Gasoline and paraffin are both mixtures of hydrocarbons. The former can burn in an automobile engine and the latter in a candle, but the burning has to be initiated. Left to itself, gasoline and paraffin will remain as such for extended periods of time.

The silicon-oxygen bond is, however, 89 and the silicon-hydrogen bond is 75. Silicates thus tend to remain silicates even under reducing conditions, whereas silanes are comparatively easily oxidized to silicates.

In short, the odds are weighted in favor of hydrocarbons in the case of carbon, and in favor of silicates in the case of silicon. Given the slightest excuse, carbon will be converted to hydrocarbons and life, while silicon will be converted to silicates and nonlife.

In fact, even if silanes *were* formed, the result would probably not be life. Life requires very complicated molecules, and carbon atoms can combine into very long chains and very complicated sets of rings. That is because the carbon-carbon bond is quite strong — 58.6. The silicon-silcon bond is distinctly weaker — 42.5.

This means that a chain of silicon atoms is feebler than one of carbon atoms and falls apart more readily. In fact, chemists have not been able to form anything more complicated than a hexasilane, with six silicon atoms in the molecule. Compare this with the carbon chains in ordinary fats and oils, which are commonly made up of 16 carbon atoms linked together — and that is by no means a record.

Furthermore, carbon atoms cling together strongly enough to make possible the existence of carbon-carbon double bonds, and even triple bonds, though these are weaker than single bonds. This multiplies and remultiplies the number and variety of organic compounds that are possible.

Double and triple bonds have been thought to be not possible in the case of silicon-silicon combinations, so that whole masses of complexity were removed from potential existence.

But only *apparently*. In 1981, double bonds involving silicon atoms were, for the first time, reported. These were not in silanes, but in other types of silicon compounds that (perhaps?) might serve as the basis of life.

For a discussion of that, however, we will have to wait for next month.

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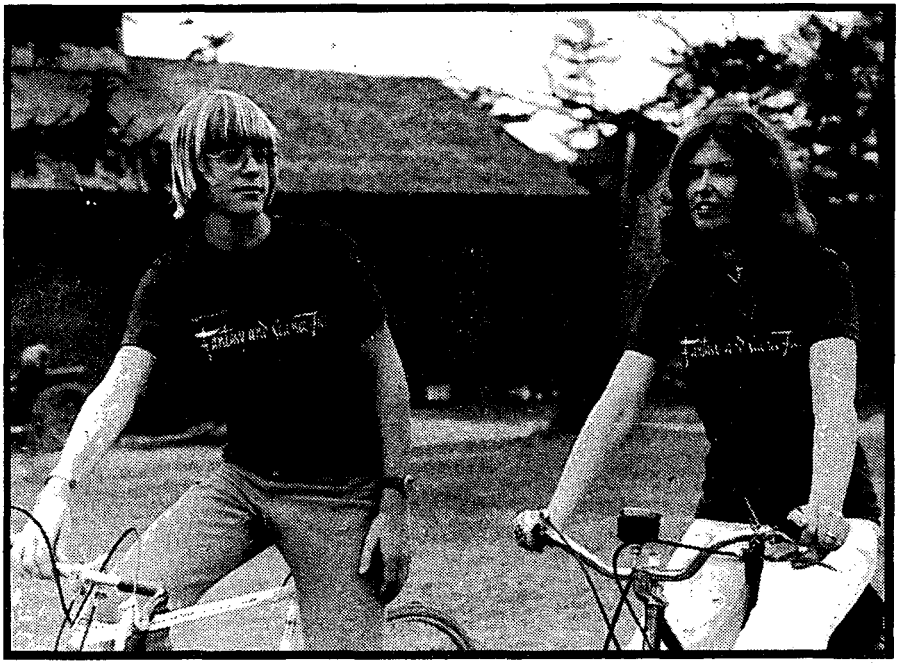

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This story was written in the front window of a bookstore, the recently opened Dangerous Visions, in Sherman Oaks, California. Because he has now written in public in London, New York, Boston, Paris and elsewhere, Ellison decided to add an unusual element to this already difficult chore. Any customer who bought $50 worth of books could submit a theme, title, beginning or story element that Ellison would integrate into that day's work. So successful was the ploy that by the third night there were over twenty submissions. On Friday, December 18th, Ellison went into the window of Dangerous Visions realizing that he would be there forever if he didn't devise a story that would utilize all *the remaining ideas, each one more bizarre than the previous one. Fortunately, one of the hopeful collaborators was Michael Hodel, host of the Hour 25 SF radio show on Los Angeles's KPFK. He had asked for a story in which Ellison and himself appeared as characters doing the Hour 25 broadcast. So Ellison set up a parallel situation to his real life writing quandary. In this unusual story, almost every person who phones in is a real person. And what they call in to ask Ellison to develop into stories is taken straight off their written submissions. Ellison completed the work you are about to read on December 19, in the middle of the bookstore's Christmas party, with hundreds of boisterous fans looking on. He calls this the most deranged writing experience of his offbeat career.*

The Hour That Stretches

BY

HARLAN ELLISON

The red light flashed ON THE AIR; hincty synthesizer music composed for the tone-deaf began going out at 90.7 megahertz; Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, made a circle with thumb and forefinger; and for the five hundred and forty-first time in the eleven years it had been on KPFK-FM in Los Angeles, *Hour 25* was on the wing. The clock in the booth said 10:02 PM.

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"Good evening, this is your host for *Hour 25*, Mike Hodel, and my guest tonight is Harlan Ellison. For those of you who have read Mr. Ellison's forty books, very close to almost one thousand short stories, articles, television columns, essays or commentaries; or who've seen his teleplays on commercial television ... he needs no introduction. For those of you to whom Harlan's name isn't a household word..."

Ellison cut in. "Have yourselves put under house arrest for terminal illiteracy."

Hodel grinned. "That, listeners, was the voice of Harlan Ellison. And I know he'll kill me for saying this, because he doesn't like people to know his many kindnesses, but Harlan came down at the last minute, to an urgent phone call about twenty minutes before we were scheduled to go on the air, filling in for our previously scheduled guest, Dr. Jerry Pournelle—"

Ellison cut in again. "Who is off in the Sierra Maestra mountains of Cuba, helping to train marauders for the violent overthrow of Fidel Castro, or backpacking, or some dumb thing like that."

"No, come on now," Hodel said, stifling a smile, "That's not true and you know it."

"Of course I know it. That doesn't mean I won't malign the man, even if he *is* my friend. In fact, I'll malign him *because* he's my friend. I mean, anybody who'd call Ellison a friend is obviously a thoroughly corrupt, degenerate sod."

"Dr. Pournelle, folks, is *actually* in Pasadena, at the LungFishCon, at the Pasadena-Hilton. At probably this very moment he's on a panel with Barry Longyear, John Norman, Norman Spinrad and Joanna Russ..."

Ellison cut in again. "The topic of which is 'Labia and Broadsword Imagery in Contemporary Sci-Fi.' "

In the control booth, Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, fell apart with laughter, snorting Coca-Cola from his nose all over the console.

"And the convention," Hodel went on doggedly, "is the reason the station is absolutely dead tonight. Even my eminent co-host, Mel Gilden—"

Ellison: "Star of the eminent sci-fi film *Mel Needs Women.*"

"—Mel Gilden is down there tonight acting as Emcee. So I'm here in solitary congress with our guest and our crack engineer, Burt Handelsman."

"So what're we gonna do on this silly show?" Ellison said.

"Well, we can talk about what's

The Author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Mr. Michael Hodel, Ms. Terry Hodel, Mr. Burt Handelsman, Mr. Mel Gilden, Ms. Joanne Gutreimen, Mr. Mike Taylor, Mr. Buzz Dixen, Ms. Joyce Muskat, Mr. John Ratner, Mr. Alan Chudnow, Mr. Jon R. McKenzie, Mr. Jeff Rubenstein, Mr. Dan Turner, Mr. Charles Garcia, Mr. Mayer Alan Brenner, Mr. William Stout, Mr. Tad Stones, Mr. Ed Coffey, Mr. Jon Clarke, Ms. Diana Adkins, Mr. James Haralson, Mr. Genadie Sverlow, Mr. Tim Lewis and the staff of the Dangerous Visions *bookstore, Sherman Oaks, California, in the creation of this piece of fiction.*

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happened to your script for Asimov's *I, Robot.*"

"Please. Spare me. My life is miserable enough as it is."

"Well, we can always open up the phone lines and take calls from the Group Mind of our faithful listeners."

"Please," Ellison said, "do I really have to deal with people who read science fiction? I saw a rerun of Tod Browning's *Freaks* last Wednesday and that's about all the sf fans I can handle for one week."

"Ignore him, Group Mind. He's actually a sweet, gentle, loving man who adores his readers."

"All three of them; especially the one with the goiter."

"Okay. The phone numbers are 985-KPFK or toll-free from Orange County it's 985-5735. If you're outside the 213 area, don't call collect; we frown on moochers and Pacifica has no money."

Ellison suddenly clapped his hands. "Hey, I've got a nifty idea."

"But is it a peachy idea?"

"It is nifty, peachy, swell and even keen.

"If I had a dime for every clown who has ever come up to me at a cocktail party or convention or at an autograph session and said, 'Boy, have I got an idea for a story for *you*,' I'd have just a lotta dimes. So why don't you invite your cadre of freakos, devos and pervos to call in and offer ideas for stories that I will then attempt to whip into utter greatness?"

Hodel's eyes sparkled. "How about that, Group Mind? A first, right here on *Hour 25.* Harlan Ellison will collaborate with you on an original idea. All of you who've been nurturing the secret belief that you can write, here's your chance to see what kind of an inventive mind you've got."

"And of course," Ellison said, "If I sell the stories, I'll acknowledge the contribution of the caller."

"What about the money from the sale?" Hodel asked.

"What about it?" Ellison responded.

"Will you share it?"

"I'm willing to attempt a crazy stunt," Ellison said. "That doesn't mean I'm crazy." He thought a minute. "My philosophy is that of Robin Hood's: steal from everybody and keep it all myself."

In the control booth Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, signaled the lines were lighting up. "Okay, here's our first call," Hodel said, hitting one of the buttons on the call director. He threw the switch on the pedestal mike, permitting the caller's voice to be heard in the booth. "You're on the air," he said.

"Hi, this is Joanne Gutreimen. I have an idea for Harlan Ellison."

"Where are you calling from?" Hodel asked.

"What?"

"I asked you where you're calling from?"

"I have an idea for Harlan Ellison."

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"Yes, I know. But *where are you?*"

"I'm here. In Hollywood. Where are you?"

Ellison rolled his eyes. "What's your idea, Ms. Gutreimen?"

There was silence for a long moment. Hodel looked at Ellison and Ellison looked at Hodel. Both shrugged. Then the woman's voice came through the speaker again. "I had this idea of ... people are always writing about haunted houses ... what about a haunted condominium?"

Ellison rolled his eyes. "Fresh, daring, original. Walter Kerr in the *New York Times.*"

"What?" the woman said.

"Nothing," Ellison said. He tried rolling his eyes but they were starting to burn from all the activity. "Go on."

"Well, actually," she said, "I was thinking about writing this myself ... but couldn't come up with any plot ideas. So I scrapped it. But I *did* get an idea from it for a terrific title."

"Thrill me," Ellison said, holding his head.

" 'Mondo Condo,' " she said.

Hodel smiled. "Well, Harlan, there you go. Your first story-collaboration idea tonight. What can you do with it?"

"A high colonic comes immediately to mind," Ellison said.

"What?" the woman on the speaker said.

"Nothing," Ellison shouted. "Let me think a second. Talk to yourselves; I'll be with you in a minute."

Hodel began to whistle. He was a round little man with a kind face. For years he had worn eyeglasses hewn from the bottoms of Moët champagne jeroboams, but upon the accidental discovery that he was considered a sex object, he had been fitted with contact lenses. Even so, even with the naked teddybearness of his soft brown eyes revealed, no one called him Michael.

"Okay, how about this," Ellison said, interrupting Hodel's whistling of Johann Friedrich Fasch's *Concerto in C Major for Bassoon, Strings and Continuo*, "how about this recently converted condo that was originally an apartment house built in the late 1920's. The custodian or janitor was a vicious creep who'd never do any work for the tenants. Everybody hated him. One of those kind of tormented devils Lovecraft was always writing about. And the only pleasure he got was from strangling cats. Maybe the building had a lot of old ladies on welfare living there, see, and all of them had cats, the way old ladies on welfare always do. And every week some poor old lady's tabby would disappear. And what was happening was that this terrible janitor was snatching them, bashing their heads against walls, drowning them, strangling them, tossing them into the furnace..."

Hodel wrinkled up his face. "Yuccch."

"Oh, I don't know," Ellison said cheerily, "it's a healthier occupation than cheating on your income tax.

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"Anyhow, twenty years before the janitor mysteriously disappeared. Not a trace was found of him, see. But now this expensive condo is being haunted by sounds from the walls, a la Lovecraft. Ghastly sounds. Hideous sounds. The sounds of the ghost of the janitor being torn to shreds over and over by the ghosts of these demon cats he buried in the walls and basement of the building."

There was silence at both ends of the radio link.

"How's that grab ya?" Ellison asked.

"You are a very disturbed person," Joan Gutreimen said softly. Then she hung up.

"Go try to please people," Ellison said.

Hodel was staring at him with considerable distance. "You don't like cats, I gather."

"I don't even like the cats you *haven't* gathered," Ellison said. He lit his pipe and puffed deeply. Hodel rolled his eyes and punched up another call. "You're on the air," he said.

"Hi, Harlan," a man said. "This is Mike Taylor. My idea is an old woman with a sharpened spoon and hypnotic powers who steals the eyes from men and women for their vision."

Ellison was silent for a moment. Hodel waited expectedly. There was the intimation of eye-rolling and head-holding.

"I already wrote that one," Ellison said. "Sort of. It was called 'Seeing' and you can find it in my book, STRANGE WINE. It's about these people who have mutated eyes and they can see special visions, the outline of a person's future, all sorts of things. I called them 'forever eyes' and the story is about a bootleg operation that steals peoples' 'forever eyes.' "

"Oh," Mike Taylor said. "Okay, then forget it. But if you were going to steal my idea, you should have paid me."

"I wrote it in 1976. This is 1982 and you just called in with it. How did I steal it before you thought of it?"

Taylor hummed for a moment, then said, "Everybody knows how clever you are."

"Right," Ellison agreed. "Voodoo. Bye-bye, Mr. Taylor."

Hodel cut him off and hit another button.

"You're on the air with *Hour 25* and Harlan Ellison."

"Hi, Mike; this is Buzz Dixon. Here's my idea; let's see what Ellison can do with it."

"Me widdle heart am goin' pitta-pat," Ellison said into the microphone.

Dixon cleared his throat and began talking very fast. "Bloodworld is a small, distant, barren planet enveloped in a dense, corrosive, poisonous atmosphere. It's named for the dark red 'blood' that bubbles just below the planet's outer crust—"

"As opposed to its *inner* crust, I presume?" Ellison said.

"What?"

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"Nothing. Never mind. Go on."

"Oh, okay. Well, this 'blood' is pumped up and refined into Immortaline, a dark black liquid with almost miraculous healing and life-prolonging properties. Immortaline is very, very expensive and is much sought after; for this reason Bloodworld's location is kept strictly secret."

"Even from its inhabitants," Hodel said.

Ellison made a tsk-tsking motion at the show's host. Hodel spread his hands as if to say, *your vicious sense of humor is catching, Ellison.*

Buzz Dixon said, "What?"

"Nothing, nothing ... go on," Ellison said, sticking his tongue out at Hodel. In the control booth, Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, was rolling on the floor.

"Bloodworld, however, is sentient," Dixon went on. "It's a living planet with a form of logic vastly different from our own. Not different values, but an entirely different system of thinking and rationalizing. Bloodworld does share some concepts with humans which makes communication theoretically possible. For example, to both humans and Bloodworld, love is the highest emotion. But to Bloodworld, to love is to kill."

"Is that it?" Ellison said.

"Yeah. What can you turn that into?"

"The police is my first inclination," Ellison said with a particularly snotty inflection. "But ... um ... lemme see ... uh ...okay, how's this? First of all, we drop that bullshit about 'to love is to kill.' Ley's say a multi-planet consortium originating on Earth has planted a colony on Bloodworld to extract the goop that makes Immortaline. And let's say that they've spent years terraforming the planet so humans can live there. They've even brought in some samples of soil from Earth so they can grow trees that will produce enough oxygen to alter the atmosphere. And let's say that this sentient planet, Bloodworld, has managed to tap into the sentient unconscious possessed by *all* planets, and it's struck up this sort of colloquy with Earth. And they fall in love.

"And Earth is made aware of Bloodworld's love, and together they come to despise these crawling, destructive little bugs called human beings that have polluted the Earth and are now bleeding Bloodworld dry, as they have every other planet in the universe, and like a good James M. Cain thriller Bloodworld and Earth, sort of planetary Romeo and Juliet, decide to kill off the human race by altering the structure of Immortaline so instead of giving eternal life to humans it makes them infertile, thereby programming the death of the species.

"And the tragic kicker is that here's Bloodworld, way out here in an arm of the Trifid Nebula, say, and good old Earth back there in the Milky Way, or wherever the hell we are, and they kill off the human race, but they can never

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get together. They are lovers separated by the universe. How's that grab you?"

Even Hodel nodded with appreciation. "Gee, that's okay," Dixon said.

"Terrific," Ellison replied. "Thank your mother for the chicken soup." And Hodel cut him off.

"You're looking faint," Hodel said.

"I have an allergic response to lunacy. Makes me break out in the twitches. Takes large infusions of Dickens and Jorge Amado novels to bring me out of it."

"Would you settle for a Fresca?"

"I'd sooner have a hysterectomy."

Hodel punched up another call. "You're on the air with Hodel and Ellison. Be careful, he's starting to glaze over."

"Hi, Mike. This is Joyce Muskat."

"Hi, Joyce," said Ellison. "Long time, no see. You have an idea?"

"I certainly do. I was listening to you on the subject of cats. And since you're obviously an aelurophile..."

"Martians are warping your radio reception, Muskat," Ellison said. "I'm an aelur*ophobe*. I hate the little fuckers."

"In literary circles, Harlan, we call that irony," she said gently, responding to the note of hysteria in his voice. "I understand your aversion. That's why I want you to create a story about a cat that cries undrying tears. It's a tabby cat. Its name is Thalassa."

Ellison stared at the wall. After a moment he began to moan. Then he began speaking in tongues.

"I warned you," Hodel said. "He's gone over the edge."

"No, no ... I'm fine ... just *fine*," Ellison croaked. "Let me think a moment. Undrying tears. That is to say, tears what don't dry. It's a tabby cat. A sweet, little, lovable tabby cat. Molasses is its name..."

"Not molasses ... Thalassa. The Greek personification of the sea," she said.

"Thalassa. Right. Sorry. My mind seems to be giving way. I can't thank you enough for this idea, Joyce. You're a brick." He closed his eyes, rubbed his temples and thought.

"The silence you hear is Ellison thinking," Hodel told the audience. "While we're waiting, let me tell you about my new wife, Nancy."

From behind closed eyes Ellison murmured, "I'm sure they *live* for the knowledge."

"My new wife, Nancy," Hodel began a thoroughly lachrymose expression suffusing his round little face, "is a woman of sterling qualities..."

"The most sterling of which is that she's brought her lunacy under control totally, save for having married you. Shut up, Hodel, I've got an idea for Muskat's stupid concept."

"I'm sure they're waiting with bated breath."

"The undrying tears the cat is crying are actually the legendary Waters of Nepenthe, the water of forgetfulness from Greek mythology. The cat is the

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eternal trustee of the potent waters, turned loose in ancient times to bring release from painful memories to mortals. The animal is thousands of years old. The cat is captured by an unscrupulous sort of person, like Stromboli the puppet master who chained up Pinocchio. He's going to sell the undrying tears of Nepenthe for exorbitant rates. And, uh, I don't know how I'd develop it, but in the end the cat would probably find some way to get the Stromboli creep to drink some of the tears, thereby forgetting what the cat is ... and it would get away to continue its mission on earth."

"I like that," Joyce Muskat said. "See, you're not such an unfeeling prick, after all."

The rest of the hour went that way.

John Ratner suggested two ideas: a parasitic business manager who finds he is becoming a character in his top client's newest production; and a concept, nebulous in the extreme, about "beautiful people" in a Los Angeles where humans have grown fur coats on themselves and there's no fashion industry. Ellison's development of these were less than successful. He wound up apologizing. Ratner forgave him.

Alan Chudnow called in with something different. A title. Just a title. "Dust Is Falling at the Tower of Minos." Ellison insulted his mustache, reaffirmed his desire to make it with his grandmother, and told him he'd file away the story title till he was ready to write a Samuel R. Delany-style trilogy. That time would come, Ellison assured Chudnow, soon after the writing of a novel featuring dragons, small people with furry feet and unicorns the responded to anyone who was *not* a virgin. "Tramp, slut unicorns," Ellison said.

Jon R. McKenzie offered the vaguest idea of the evening. "Two friends who grow apart, who change, yet remain the same and come back together over the period 1970 to 1980." Ellison had trouble with that one, finally falling back on a variation of his story "Shatterday," by suggesting they were halves of the same person, traumatically severed in childhood, who had grown up in the same neighborhood without realizing they were the dark and light sides of the same persona. "And in the end," Ellison said, drawing to a close with that idea, "the dark side becomes a killer and the light side becomes a priest; and in the concluding scene the good guy, Father Flotski, is outside the prison where the bad guy, Mad Dog Berkowitz is holed up with hostage guards, and Father Flotski is yelling up at him with a bullhorn, 'Come on, you no-good kike, let the guards go before I have the Virgin Mary bite off your nose!' "

Three subsequent phone calls accused Ellison of being an anti-Semite. Ellison responded by saying, "Some of my best friends are Jews. Like my mother. My father. Me."

Jeff Rubenstein came on the air re-

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minding Ellison he was the manager of a Crown Books shop in the San Fernando Valley where Ellison shopped. "What's your idea?" Ellison asked.

He wished he hadn't. "How about the domestication of Arabian camels to be used as race animals for American racetrack betting; and National Football League players all want to ride them as jockeys."

"Jeff," Ellison said, "you are a good and decent human being, and I thank you for all your courtesy when I come into Crown, but *that* is in the top tenth of the first percentile of lamebrained ideas I have ever had thrown at me."

"In other words, you're giving up, admitting defeat, is that it?" Hodel said. Ellison threw the can of Fresca past his head.

"I'm not admitting defeat," Ellison said. "I just need a while to let this one percolate. It ain't easy."

"Okay, we'll take another call."

"My name is Dan Turner. How about a story in which someone invents a way for individuals to get what they deserve?"

Ellison smiled. "Not what they *want* ... what they *deserve?*"

"Yeah."

"That's easy. The guy who develops the gizmo has been in love with this beautiful, witty, intelligent woman all his life, but she won't have anything to do with him. Contrariwise, there's this plain-looking woman — not ugly, just sort of average — who's been in love with *him*, and she can't get him. Well, when he's busy turning this gizmo on people, giving them what they deserve, someone turns it on him..."

"And he gets the plain woman, right?" Hodel said.

"Wrong. He gets a thoroughly rotten woman. He didn't even deserve the nice, decent, average woman."

"It doesn't knock me out," Hodel said.

"The original idea didn't send me to the moon, either, Hodel. I'm dancing as fast as I can here."

Hodel punched up another call. Ellison was beginning to reel. He had the feeling he had been sucked headfirst into the collective head of science fiction fandom, and he didn't like the neighborhood. "You're on the air."

"Hi, I'm Charles Garcia, and my topic for a story is another story about the little blue Jewish aliens with wheels who needed a *minyan* for their dying planet; and throw in something about the Pope, if possible."

"You mean you want me to write a sequel to 'I'm Looking for Kadak'?"

"Uh-huh."

"Mr. Garcia, that's not an idea. I did that one already."

"Oh." He sounded wounded. "Okay." And he rang off.

Ellison looked chagrined. "I think I hurt his feelings."

"As opposed to the thousands you've insulted tonight who are probably all slashing their wrists or mailing you bombs," Hodel said wryly.

"Yeah, well ... I didn't *mean* to

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upset Garcia."

Hodel put on another caller. Mayer Alan Brenner.

"I know you," Ellison said.

"You sure do. And I've got a beauty for you."

"Be still my heart," Ellison said, sinking down on his spine.

"It's an excerpt from NORTHEAST TREE AND STREAM," Mayer said. "A short natural history of the famous Chesapeake Tree-Climbing Octopus..."

"Why me?" Ellison groaned. "Which God did I offend?"

"All of them," said Hodel.

Mayer went on, undaunted by sounds of pain coming over his radio. "This retiring and rarely glimpsed creature lives in the many quiet estuaries of the Chesapeake system. Early each morning the octopus leaves the water and crawls up the trunk of a shoreside tree. It makes its way precariously onto a branch overhanging the water, where it waits for its prey to pass underneath."

Silence ensued. Dead air hung heavily in the night.

Finally, Ellison said, "And that's it, right? That's the idea, right, Mayer?"

"Uh-huh."

More silence. Then, in a very soft, very tired voice, Ellison said, "These blue-skinned Jewish aliens with wheels come down to Earth and kidnap the Pope so they can have a race on Arabian camels to establish whether Jews or Gentiles are worthiest to live in the universe, and the Pope gets all these NFL players to ride as his team, because they're all Polish or black and not a Jew in the lot, and they have this watercourse raceway and they race for the universe, and as they come under this tree in the Chesapeake system the octopus drops out of a tree and eats every last, fucking one of them, football players, Jewish aliens, the Pope, the camels, Brian Sipe and Terry Bradshaw and Walter Payton *and you too Mayer!*"

In the control room Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, was trying to laugh and pick his nose at the same time.

"The time is 10:55 and this is KPFK-FM in Los Angeles," Hodel said. "And this is *Hour 25*, the weekly program of speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy and wonder ... and I'm your host, Mike Hodel."

"This is a *science fiction* program?!" Ellison shrieked. "This isn't *The 700 Club*? But I came to declare for Ba'al!"

Hodel punched up a call. "You're on the air."

It was William Stout, the artist responsible for the bestselling DINOSAURS book. "I want him to think up a story in which William Stout gets to meet some real dinosaurs," he said. He waited.

Ellison said, "Okay, there's this story in which William Stout gets to meet some real dinosaurs, and they have lots and lots of nice adventures, and if you want to find out how this

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story ends, go to the library and ask Miss Beckwith to let you check out the book. So long, Stout, you asshole."

Hodel said, "Thank God we have an eight-second delay on the live phone lines."

"You don't have any eight-second delay," Ellison said.

"I know, I know," Hodel said, dropping his head into his hands.

"And now, let's cut to Pasadena, to the LungFishCon, for the weekly calendar of events and the scintillant Terry Hodel, this dip's ex-wife," Ellison said. Hodel was weeping.

Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, threw the switch and the booth went dead as Terry Hodel did the calendar remote.

Hodel looked up, with tears in his eyes. "The FCC's gonna get me again. You did it to me the last time, and you're gonna do it again this time."

"You knew the job was dangerous when you took it," Ellison said. Then a look of transcendental horror passed over his face. "Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod ... where's Jane? What happened to my girlfriend, Jane? Where did I leave her? Ohmigod, this program has drained my brain. Where did I park her, did I lock her, is someone even now stealing her hubcaps?"

"She went home to North Attleboro to see her parents last week," Hodel said. "Calm down. She's all right."

Ellison visibly relaxed, breathed a sigh of relief. "Boy, it was touch-and-go there for a minute."

Burt Handelsman, c.e., suddenly boomed in the room. "Terry's almost finished. Get set for a cue."

The red light flashed and Hodel said, "Well, we're back now. How're you doing, Harlan?"

"You know, I work seriously at my craft. I spend hours and days and months and years writing these stories with proper serious intent ... and then I'm thrown into conjunction with my readers ... and it's scary, very scary. These people are all *nuts!*"

"Yes, but *you're* the one making stories out of these crazy ideas."

"I'm just a Force of Good in My Time," Ellison replied.

"Well, we're going to make it easy for you," Hodel said. "Group Mind, we're only going to take, say, five more ideas; and then Harlan and I will chat about other things."

"Bless yuh, Massa Ho'del, suh; I jus' loves wukkin' foah yuh heah on de plantation."

Hodel punched up a caller. "This is Tad Stones, and I'm calling in an idea for Ed Coffey."

"Good old Ed Coffey, whoever the hell *he* is," Ellison murmured. "Now they're selling shares in my breakdown."

"This is a science fiction story," Tad Stones said.

"What a swell change of pace," Ellison said through clenched teeth, thereby making it unintelligible to the audience.

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"An average-looking man offers the owner of a video arcade a free computer game for market testing. At the same moment, apparently the same man is making the same offer to arcades across the country."

Ellison gritted his teeth. The sound of avalanches went out at one milion cycles per second.

"It's an alien plot, okay?" Ellison said.

"You asking me?" Tad Stones said.

"Yeah. I'm asking you. Alien invasion, right?"

"Sure. If you say so."

"Clones, They're clones. That okay, too?"

"Uh-huh."

"Alien clone invasion, howzabout it?"

"Why are you asking me?"

"I aims to please, Mr. Stones. An alien clone invasion from Far Centauri that has as its secret intent the violent overthrow of video arcades. How about it, Stones, you dip? Satisfactory?"

Hodel was getting disturbed. Ellison was no longer funny. He was getting actively vicious. The self-mocking tone at the edge of his remarks was vanishing. Hodel scribbled a note and thrust it in front of Ellison's glazed eyes. *Are you okay?*

"Am I okay, am I okay?" Ellison howled. "No, I'm not okay. I'm going bugfuck in here! Do you have any idea what it does to someone who spends fifteen hours a day writing to have to deal with this shit?"

"I write, too, Harlan," Hodel said gently.

His concern was evident. Ellison, who had been spiraling up into hysteria, calmed down quickly. "I'm sorry. Yes, of course, you understand. I've read ENTER THE LION, and you're a very *good* writer, Mike. He's a very *good* writer, folks." He paused. "But I'm *still* going bugfuck!"

Great clouds of smoke etna'd from his pipe.

There were only four more to go. The first was a man named Jon Clarke who reminded Ellison that he had held down the tire-puncture spikes at the entrance to Cal State, Northridge, when the writer had spoken there some years before and was late in arriving and had to drive in the egress to get to the auditorium. He offered an idea about a Group Mind on cable television stealing the souls of those who appear on its circuits. Ellison was far gone by that time and could make no sense of the idea. He babbled something about gestalt video vampirism and sank into a depressed funk.

Then a woman named Diana Adkins called and they both listened as she said, "This really happened. A little boy I knew, who was bright, was asked why, in school and everywhere else, he didn't exhibit how bright he was. And he said, 'If I hold a candle under the bed, no one will see the flame,' and when he was asked why he would hold a candle under the bed, he said, 'Be-

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cause if I don't, someone will put it out.'"

Hodel said, "That's very sad." Ellison said nothing.

"Thank you for calling," Hodel said. He cut to a new caller. Only two to go. He was worried about his guest. He'd known Ellison for years, and the sharpest parrallel to what seemed to be happening to him was a story Ellison had written about a man being drained by emotional vampires. He wanted to cut this off before something more spectacular than he could handle went down.

"You're on the air, and you're the next to last, so make it good."

His name was James Haralson, he was calling from Covina, and he said, "A TV evangelist, Markus Osgood, awakes one fine morning in his huge bed to discover that during the night something inexplicable had occurred. His consciousness had slipped. Somehow, as he slept next to the lovely and beloved Catherine, his center-of-being, his point of view, his 'I,' had shifted from the usual spot in his head and was hovering near his left armpit."

Ellison mumbles, "Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?"

But Haralson was continuing. "Disconcerting, it was; and disorienting. but he makes do until that afternoon when, during his live, satellite-beamed, ocean-spanning ministry of the air, his consciousness starts slipping again. As he talks to the Orange County studio audience, he realizes his center-of-being is heading for his navel."

"I'm going mad," Ellison muttered. "I've gone mad; I've been sent to Hell and I'm never going to be reprieved."

Hodel rushed in quickly. "That's an invalid concept. Consciousness isn't in a certain location. It's wherever you perceive it to be. In the Eighteenth Century they thought it was in the heart; the Greeks thought it was in the liver, which is why Prometheus had his liver chewed out by the big bird. Because of Freud we think consciousness is in the brain."

Haralson argued. "Well, if he *thinks* it's heading somewhere else, from his armpit to his navel to beyond ... then it *could* be. So let Ellison say where it's heading."

Ellison drew a deep breath, sat up, laid his pipe on the studio table, leaned close to the mike and said, "It's heading for Provo, Utah, where it will meet a woman who works for the city sanitation department, in the typing pool; it will woo her, win her, marry her and have three children by her, one of which will be a waterhead like you."

Then he slumped back in his chair. He closed his eyes.

"Uh..." Hodel said. "Uh ... he was, uh, just kidding, Mr. Haralson. It's been a long night. Just a joke."

"Didn't sound like a damned joke to me," Haralson said. "I didn't call in to be insulted."

"Consider it lagniappe," Ellison murmured.

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Haralson hung up.

Hodel was now flat-out worried. Ellison was on the far side of flakey. This wasn't such a good show any more. It was getting useless and nasty. He decided to take on the last caller himself.

He punched up the last call, signaling Burt Handelsman, c.e., to cut off all other incoming callers, and said "Okay, you're the last idea tonight. What've you got for us?"

"My name is Genadie Sverlow, and my idea is that the reason Sherlock Holmes never went after Jack the Ripper is that the Ripper was actually Dr. Watson, and Holmes knew it."

Hodel heaved a sigh of relief. Synchronicity lived! His novel, ENTER THE LION, was a Sherlock Holmes pastiche. It could not have been a better question.

"Glad you asked that," Hodel said. "In point of fact, it couldn't have been Watson. The reason is, if you'll excuse the expression, elementary. Look: would you want Sherlock Holmes looking for *you*? Of course not. Watson *couldn't* be the Ripper ... he'd know that Holmes could spot him right off. Besides ... it's bad art. Too pat."

Ellison stood up and stepped away from the microphone as Hodel went on. "There are other reasons, chronological ones, why he couldn't have; but that's the bottom line. It would have been too dangerous. Whatever else Watson was, he was no fool."

Burt Handelsman, c.e., came to the window between the studio and the control booth and held up a note written with heavy felt-tip lines: THERE'S A GUY ON LINE 4 NAMED TIM LEWIS WHO SAYS HE HAD THE SAME STORY IDEA. WANT HIM?

Hodel signaled no, and drew a finger across his throat to indicate no more calls. Then, before the caller on the line could get him into further Holmesian minutiae, he cut the line. "Okay, that's the end of the story ideas."

He looked over at Ellison. The writer was standing with his face to the wall. The time was 11:26 turning to 27.

"Harlan?"

The writer turned slowly. His eyes were cold and faraway.

"We've got about thirty-three minutes. Want to just chat about what *you're* writing these days?"

Ellison nodded wearily and fell into the seat again.

Then the voice came through the studio speaker. "May I impose, please, to enter your conversation?" It was a male voice.

Hodel snapped a look at the call director. All the lighter were out. He raised his eyes to B.H., c.e., and drew a finger across his throat sharply, urgently. "No more calls, please!" he said. But Handelsman, was looking frantic. He waved wildly and indicated by his confusion that *he* wasn't responsible for this call.

Hodel looked for the little red light on the mike pedestal that indicated the

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speaker phone was on. It was dark.

Ellison didn't seem to realize what was happening.

What was happening, beyond reason, was that someone was coming in over the telephone lines ... without using the telephones lines. Hodel decided to go with it — carefully.

"Do you have an idea for Harlan Ellison? It's pretty late, and we were just going to knock around some small talk."

The voice said, "There is a concept of some interest. Postulate, if you will, an alien life-form; an intelligent, sensitive being who, for reasons we need not go into now, has been cast adrift. Marooned, if you will, in a dark place. Alone, left to drift between the stars. And there it waits, without light, without weight, without emotional sustenance, without the companionship of thinking, feeling beings. A thing without purpose. Waiting, forever waiting, drifting emptily in the stars."

Burt was running around the control room trying to find the active link. He kept coming back to the window, pushing his nose against the glass and waving his arms wildly. It wasn't happening, it simply could not, would not be happening!

"Where are you calling from?" Hodel asked.

"Nearby," said the voice.

Hodel didn't know what to do but continue talking.

"Well, that's an interesting idea," he said. "Maybe it's not the newest, but—"

Ellison was leaning in to the mike. His eyes were closed, and his face looked strained. "But how do we know this being is as represented?" he said. His voice was calm now, all trace of his tension and hysteria gone.

"What do you mean, if I may ask?" said the voice.

"Well, what I mean is this," Ellison said. "What if this creature, this sentience, this intelligence, was marooned by its own kind for reasons humans couldn't even understand; but for some quality or maleficence that branded it forever as a life-form unfit to exist with—"

"With responsible beings?" the voice said.

"If you will. What if?"

"Then perhaps the lonely creature would wait until it could make contact, to fall back on the kindness of other decent, responsible beings."

"Ah," Ellison said, concentrating. "I see. Wait for some gullible, young species that would be so amazed it wouldn't ask the proper questions. That would take this Trojan horse in, to succor it..."

"To warm it."

"To nurture and protect it."

"Yes, yes, that is exactly what I speak of. A new home without darkness, where the companionship of other thinking beings would return it to the community of intelligent beings."

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"I don't think so," Ellison said.

"What do you mean?" the voice said.

"What I mean," Ellison said, now staring at the wall beyond the microphone, "is that we know about you. We've known about you for a long time. You don't think they cast you out on their way past, and left you to find a home, do you? They left records. We know what you are, and where you are. When we reach that pocket of space where you lie, we will do one of two things: ignore you ... or destroy you."

"You cannot destroy me."

"You mean destroy that hypothetical creature we were talking about."

"Yes. Hypothetical. It cannot be destroyed."

"But it *can* be left to swim in blindness forever."

The speaker went dead.

Ellison sank back in his seat.

Hodel stared at him. His mouth was open. In the control booth, Burt Handelsman, crack engineer, sat staring at the console.

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After a while, Ellison rose, let out a long breath, and walked wearily toward the door of the studio. Hodel sat where he was. As Ellison opened the soundlock door, Hodel said, "Jesus, am I crazy, or did you just save the entire world?"

Ellison looked back over his shoulder and managed a faint smile. "I'm just your basic everyday Force for Good in Our Time," he said. "And if I ever offer to talk to fans again, I want you to drive a stake through my heart."

He walked out, the door sighed shut, and Mike Hodel realized it was still three minutes to midnight.

"Uh, this is KPFK-FM, 90.7 megahertz on your dial; and this has been *Hour 25*. I'm Mike Hodel; our crack engineer this evening has been Burt Handelsman; and for Terry Hodel, myself, and our guest, Harlan Ellison, this has been the hour that stretches."

He paused a moment and added: "And to *all* our listeners, *wherever* they may be, I haven't the faintest idea what the hell went on here tonight."

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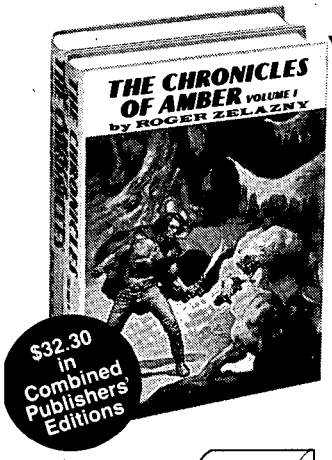

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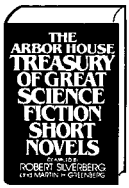

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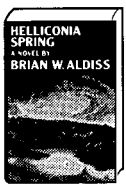

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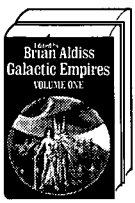

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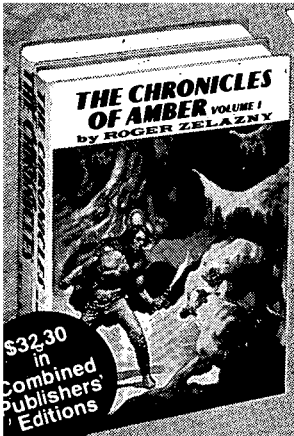

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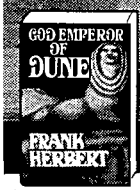

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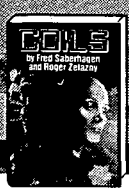

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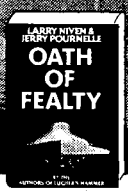

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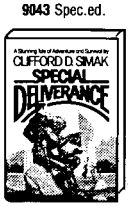

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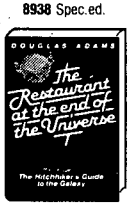

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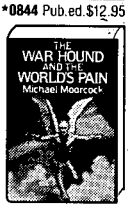

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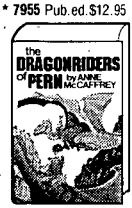

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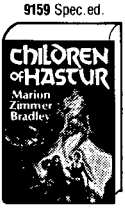

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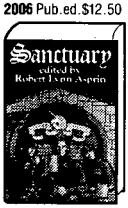

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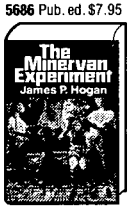

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